STUDENT MOVEMENTS OF THE 1960S

The Reminiscences of

Carl Oglesby

Oral History Research Office

Columbia University

2000

PREFACE

The following oral history is the result of one tape-recorded interview with Carl Oglesby conducted by Bret Eynon on December 12, 1984 in Cambridge, Massachusetts. These interviews are part of the Student Movements of the 1960s Oral History Project.

The reader is asked to bear in the mind that s/he is reading a verbatim transcript of the spoken word, rather than written prose.

This agreement will confirm my understanding and agreement with Columbia University with respect to my participation in a series of interviews conducted by Bret Eynon.

1. The interviews will be taped and a transcript made of the tapes. The tapes and transcript (collectively called the "Work") will be maintained by the University and made available by the University in accordance with University rules and general policies for research and other scholarly purposes.

2. I hereby grant, assign and transfer to the University all right, title and interest in the Work, including the literary rights and the copyright, except that I shall retain the right to copy, use and publish the Work in part or in full until the earlier of my death or _____ 19 .

3. The interviews will be closed to researchers except Ronald Grele and Bret Eynon until the publication of their books on the student movement of the 1960s or five years from this date, whichever is earlier. With the exception noted in section 2, until that date, they shall have sole rights to use the interview for their publications.

4. This letter contains our entire and complete understanding.

Carl Oglesby
(signature)

Date 5/23/85

ACCEPTED AND AGREED:
THE TRUSTEES OF COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY
IN THE CITY OF NEW YORK

By Jennifer Lund Nunn

Interview with Carl Oglesby by Bret Eynon

Cambridge, Mass. December 12,1984

Mr. Oglesby : ..... and, you know, Kirk (Sale) in a way is giving away his stuff ~~in~~ on SDS either. They both of them identified with the movement, so strongly, I think maybe perhaps even more strongly because they were, neither one of them, really of it, in the sense in which their interview subjects were of it.

Q: Do you think it would take some of the people who were inside to do that ? Do you think that's possible?

Oglesby: Or someone who's come along later, someone younger who can pick it up as somebody else's experience, without feeling beholden to it, or else, the opposite, without feeling a need to destroy it.

Q: Yes, well, that's the other thing. Most of these things are just sort of from people who were around and on the scene at the time, but felt threatened. Revenge. "So you guys screwed up....."

I really do think about that, about a kind of silence on the part of the people who played major roles, or even not people who played major roles, up and down the line.

Oglesby: You know, Bret, another thing that must enter into it is that I think a lot of people who were really committed, really active, haven't given up on the movement. They don't think it's over.

And it might not be. It may be just a , you know, a metaphor, talking about the death of the movement. When you actually start looking at it, how much community organizing stuff is still going on, how much organizing around nukes, disarmament, environmental issues, etc., how lively the feminist movement is, for all the battering that it's gone through , you can make a case: it's not dead, it's going on. It's found new forms and new personalities, but the spirit of popular involvement around a, in behalf of a kind of a native radical sense of democracy, I think that's continued.

It hasn't been that strong. I think the leadership has been bad, in the last several years. In particular I'm starting to carry on a little, I don't know, private vendetta, very private, very small, against the anti-nuke leadership. I don't think it was right for the movement go get drawn into such an obsession with nuclear weapons as such, and I never thought, never did I like the idea of disarmament as a movement objective , and I think if SDS had stayed together, the best of SDS, the issues would have been formulated much differently. We would have been talking about the Cold War instead of nuclear weapons, and the need to straighten out the political expectations that we have with the Russians and they with us, rather than picking up immediately the question of, how do you disarm or how do you dismantle nuclear weapons.

To me this is like grabbing a knife by the blade and trying to use it that way, club somebody with the handle. That's not the right way to use a knife.

It's true that nukes are a big problem and armament costs too damned much and threaten us like crazy, but those problems are there partly because of history. You can't disinvent nuclear weapons.

But chiefly because of the conflict between us and the Russians, and that's what worries me. That's what it seems to me people should be into talking about. I don't know exactly how you go about posing it as a movemental issue, but I think there's a dead end on this nuclear stuff.

Q: So much of it is a technical issue.

Oglesby: Yes, a technical issue, and it right away gets co-opted into mutual verifiable freeze, which is meaningless, and who would not be for that ?

Q: I mean, for all the energy that was created by that,it's really disappeared.

Oglesby: This hit me hard a couple of years ago when I was covering a conference of Jungians meeting down at Newport (Rhode Island) in some big mansion to talk about nuclear weapons. Basically it was a gathering of the faithful, and one of the guys there was Robert Jay Lifton . I was interested in what he was going to say to this group because this was in a sense the cream of the cream of the cream of those many audiences with whom he had talked about finding the -- what is it, the little baby in the street of Hiroshima and spreading before us all those horrifying tales. But I was so disappointed that he had nothing new to say. He just told the same tales of horror all over again, and I started getting mad about it. Who is this guy to sit there and call the rest of us numb, just because we don't obsess the way he does about the end of the earth ? And who is he, and who is Helen Caldicott, to set themselves up in such moral majesty just because life has worked it out such that they don't have to think

about anything but nuclear weapons and how bad a nuclear explosion would be ?

This concept of , you know, it's like, if you don't agree with me, then you're numb. You're psychically numb, if you don't react the same ~~apoplectic~~ apocalyptic way towards nuclear weapons that I do, you must not be seeing the reality, you must not have a real imagination of the truth here.

Baloney! I think that he is beginning to look like the crazy one, that Caldicott is the crazy one, that these are the obsessive, driven, monomaniacal people who have one thing to say, nothing else, haven't got a clue as to the politics of the issue they're dealing with. And to me it comes down in the end to a sense that they're just rejecting the 20th century -- as who would not, if we could ?

A lot of us have trouble with the 20th century. Although there are some nice things about it too. And above all, nuclear weapons -- it just happens. If you're in the nuclear age, then the armamentorium will be nuclearized, period. There's no way to have a nuclear era of science and engineering and technology without seeing expression of the nukes, of nuclearism, in weapons .

And a final point about it -- let me get in my little rampage here -- I think that deterrence is going to work. I mean, that sounds so blasphemous to say, but I'm sure that we and the Russians would have had five or six wars by this time if it hadn't been for nuclear weapons.

Q: Yes. I've seen that argument laid out. Certainly if you count it up right now, Russian nukes and ours... I want to go back to one thing, though. I think you're right in a lot of ways, that

certainly through the seventies, and maybe today, the following of activity that would qualify in some way as within the New Left tradition is very large, and maybe even larger in some ways than in '66, '67. But the overall dominant myth or whatever, the accepted version of the thing, is that the movement died, and that that has tremendous meaning, it seems to me. That's the version.

Oglesby: Even among movement people.

Q: Yes. Why do you think that is ?

Oglesby: I think there was a necessity to kill it. Even -- or to create the impression that it was dead -- maybe to save it, in some deep psychic sense. We saved it by spreading the word that it was dead. So all those nasty people who were hunting for it with acid-tipped arrows would go away, and hunt somebody else, or hunt no one for a while.

But then, that's probably not -- probably it's more like, people got mad, individuals got mad at other individuals or disgusted with the experience. They felt out of control in this thing that they had started up just because they felt out of control. I mean, we started the movement because we felt we had no control, and we got the movement going, and then we found it was just one more thing that we didn't have control over, and that wouldn't pay attention to us and do what we wanted it to do, so I think maybe there was something like that --some bitterness, around the Weathermen, that catastrophe.

What do you think ? You've talked to more people about it than I have. I'd be interested what you think is the dynamic of that ?

Q: I guess it seems to me that there's two things.One thing is that

-- the death of the organization, SDS was the closest to being an organization, you know, spearheading the movement, that that's really a key. And the other thing, it seems to me on an intellectual level that has to do with the limit of a certain kind of logic being reached. Particularly I think the inability, it's just conjecture, but the inability of the New Left project to include a confrontation with mass state power. When we started talking about the need to end the War in Vietnam, we had to start talking about confronting the federal government, confronting state power in its most difficult and intimidating form, and I think that the style of the New Left organization that was developing was not yet ready to meet that. Not ready to take that on. That's my sense -- that it did in some way call for a leap, that I'm not sure if the movement was ready to make, at that point in 1965.

Oglesby: A leap which way ?

Q: I don't know. I mean, the leap that was made was into , you know, the question of revolution. And that's what -- the question is posed, all right, this is what we have to change-- the answer that came back was "revolution "-- and then, what ? OK, now what ? Now what do we do with that ? seems to me to be the question that sort of ended it when no answer was found for that.

So consequently, people retreat back in some ways to the level that the New Left ideology was able to deal with, which was decentralized organizing, grassroots type things, very much an emphasis on personal interaction on the community, and that that was a doable level, -- that, people could handle. But at the level of confronting the state, there wasn't an answer. So that's where the failure

was. That's where the sense of failure comes out. Even though I would -- certainly, if you want to argue it, the movement had tremendous impact on stopping the war.

Oglesby: Oh yes.

Q: It played a major role. But there's something in, you know, the movement's consistent tendency to not value that, and to think that there had to be something more.

Oglesby: I think a lot of that must come from the fact that the movement proper didn't start out trying to end the war, and became an anti-war movement kicking and screaming, by -- it seems to me that was the main role that I played, not knowing that I was playing any kind of role at all. But I came into SDS just at the moment when the whole leadership was getting very nervous about this anti-war baloney. Tom Hayden did not want it to happen, and was ready to break the organization and to pop it like an apple, he was so convinced that it would destroy it. At least it would create a different leadership, whether it would have destroyed the movement or not. I think there was really no choice, that SDS being there had to accept its destiny, and its destiny was the war, and people should have just been glad that they had a leg up in organizing, when the time came to do something, when something had to be done.

But you know, when you look back on it, on this question of why did it die, if it died, or what does it mean to say it died, since it didn't really die -- if you look back to the beginning of it, it seems to me the important thing to notice is that it wouldn't have been very easy to figure out a standard of life. You couldn't have said, in other words, from the early days of the movement,

what it would have been, if it had not "died, " quotes around "died. "

And what I mean by that is that there was no program, beyond the Port Huron statement and an evocation of the ideal of democratic participation. Unlike almost any other -- the other Left movements, New or Old or otherwise, that people in Europe will be talking about, where there was on the contrary a highly developed vision of Socialism, and a strong consensus among those people at least who made the movement that Socialism is good and that's where they should head.

There was never anything like that here. Not that there should have been. I think maybe that was a strength of the New Left.

Q: Why do you say that ?

Oglesby: Well, it's a long rigamarole, but the bottom line is that I don't see a solution in Socialistic terms. I think that we have to make our system work, not revolutionize it. If we try to revolutionize it, a) we'll be frustrated, and b) if we're not frustrated, if we actually succeed in creating revolutionary circumstances, then before we ever come to power, Fascism will come to power. And I'm not satisfied with 1920s, 1930s Communist line about Hitler,"after Hitler us. " That was true in a sense in Germany, you know. After Hitler, at least half of Germany becomes Sovietized. But that's not what any of the German Socialists meant or wanted, and if they could have seen the outcome of it all, -- I mean, not that their movement was the cause of it, but it was all part of the enormous turmoil in Europe.

I don't know if they would have been satisfied. I don't think it would have satisfied a German Socialist of the 1920s to look ahead after World War II and see, "Oh well, we got Socialism in half

of the country, half of Germany. "

That's not what they wanted. Poland is not Socialism. Russia is not Socialism. There's a real question, what is China up to ? Is that even going to be Socialism ? Is Cuba Socialism, for God's sake ? Is there Socialism anywhere, except in the fancies of certain 19th century gentlemen who were confronted for the first time with the prospect of industrial society, were sensitive enough to see that it was something brand new, and visionary enough to imagine that since things had changed so much this far, they would probably keep on changing and maybe even faster, so the question about the future became, how will it be different ? And difference, the pursuit of a different society, became -- not only because of justice, but because of the sense that you were involved in a Darwinian evolutionary process that would create change whether you liked it or not, just the way life creates change, --

What I'm getting at, I'm getting garbled here, but what I'm getting at is the failure of Socialism to produce a vision that people can relate to, when they start out with simple, commonsensical values and desires. And I don't think that it's possible to fix that. I don't think that some new Socialist theoretician can come along and show us: oh yes, well, after all, now we see, we should be neo-Marxists or neo-Socialists or neo-Communists.

I think that we've been through too much to accept any kind of systemic conceptions of justice, and that we're -- at least, I'll speak for myself, I'm much more ready to see that the quality of justice in a society is a function of its traditions and its values, more than as a function of its economic structures. I think that its economic structures play an obviously huge part in its -- and it's reform

of economic structures which is in a sense the business of politics.

But that's a big business. There's a lot of that to be done , a lot of -- well, rationalizing of the system, to make it work better; an enormous amount of thinking and creative action is called for,with respect to these problems, almost so much that's why people give it up and say, oh well, let's forget all that, and we'll put everything on the single sovereign concept of revolution, because somehow that allows you to draw an intellectual line between now and everything up to the moment of the revolution -- and then that magic line comes down. The revolt gets made. You burn out the corrupt, the rotten, and you start out a new world, free from the error of the paset.

Huh! No! It won't happen like that ; 19th century people might have been able to imagine that it might happen like that, or that all they needed to do was to beat the bosses and put the unions in control and things would be all right. But I think these hopes have all been dashed. And dashed and dashed again. And it's a kind of a madness to keep ~~in~~ believing in them or trying to get nurture from them. I don't say it's easy to stipulate a set of objectives for a democratic Left, you know, in the absence of some great horizon project, but that's just another one of the conditions of operating in this situation. And it has to be dealt with on its own terms, not just as myth.

So I'm saying that SDS or the New Left was never really Left wing. It was Left wing in terms of policy positions, but it wasn't Left wing philosophically.

CONTAINMENT AND CHANGE, that last chapter, of my part of that, "Two Issues Revised, " stipulates right up front that we want a fusion between Right and Left. We want the good open traditional believing God-fearing honest conservative to be against secrecy in

government, to be against the manipulation of the electorate, to be against Big Brother and foreign adventures in little countries.

No reason in the world why a good old Midwestern conservative shouldn't have been against the War in Vietnam. No way in the world for him to support it, if they knew the truth.

That's where I think we got most of our power. I think at the time when we had great power, it was because we were coming straight out of that American tradition. We weren't sending past people a lot of silly ditties about the Socialism to come when we'll all be brave and free. And I think people respected that. They saw it as realism.

But then, once we had been through that set of traumas that began I think with '64, the Democratic convention of '64, and led through the Democratic convention of '68, then there was so little coherence left in the theory that you could change the system democratically and ~~peacably~~ peacefully that, you know, I had no ground under me at all, because I had been the one saying, "Let's go to Bobby Kennedy, let's go fight for Bobby Kennedy. "

I had been at a meeting in New York at the Gotham Hotel, the day Kennedy got killed, with a bunch of businessmen in an organization called Business International, which I think is probably a company front, certainly would make a good one if it isn't, and these meetings had started because the president of the company was the father of a girlfriend of one of the SDS people, and there were the normal debates between the father and the SDS kid, and the SDS kid says, "Well, why don't you talk to some more of our people. "

"Sure, glad to do it, " and this led to this meeting , basically with me to begin with and then with some other people, both

from SDS and from Business International, and they talked as if they had a pretty direct pipeline to the Bobby Kennedy campaign, and the question that was put to me, straight up, no flimflam, was, "If Bobby Kennedy is elected, what will be the attitude of the movement ? Will the movement attack him or will it get behind him ? "

Now, I said that I would get behind him, at least, and that that's what I had been fighting for him all along; if there had been that possibility in the beginning, there would never have been any need for the crazy movement, and I said, furthermore, that I thought that a lot of people in SDS would want that, and it was in fact just in a rather small self-appointed leadership elite that you would find any real resistance to it, for ideological causes.

But then Bobby Kennedy was popped off. And what do you do with that ? King, dead, there in, what, April ? and just a couple of months later, Kennedy dead, and it made you think that there was some horrible truth, horrible validity to the idea that if you did go ahead and try to make the system work, if you played by the rules and went to the marketplace with your ideas and competed with the other people in free and open, honest exchange -- as long as you could believe that that could work, you could move. But when you couldn't believe that any more -- I had nothing to tell the people. I didn't know what to say.

What are we working for ? That became an unanswerable question in late 1968, early '69, because there was no way to show any more that your mass rallies and your non-violent sit-ins were , bit by bit, mobilizing the conscience of the land. Not that it wasn't true. On the contrary, it was. Those things did just exactly what they were supposed to do, had exactly the desired and predicted effect. We won

the argument about the war, starting from zero, hands down, in a very short space of time - - three, four years. We won that debate.

And if the political system had been responsive , if it had been governed by the laws that are supposed to govern it, -- well, I say that, thinking that Kennedy was killed by a conspiracy. What if he had dropped dead of a heart attack ? There would still have been the same sense of dead end, and nowhere to go. What do you do, go get a new hero now and spend years teaching him , and pushing him at people, and pushing people at him, and having the debates and doing the sit-ins -- do it all over again ? While the people are dying in Vietnam ? And how many other country Xs ?

Get it all back again, get the balloon blown up again, and some asshole will come by with a pin. Pop! It will be all gone.

How many times do you climb the tree, just to have it chopped down beneath you ?

People got irritated at it and wouldn't go that way any more. That's why they started talking about revolution, because reform had been made to seem like a dead end street.

Q: Do you think that was a valid conclusionto draw from that ?

Oglesby: Yes. Yes, it was.Not that it wasn't -- it was hard to avoid it , especially when you were young and you had never done anything like that before. But if there had only been some greyer and wiser heads, who could have said, "Listen, this is history. These things happen. Don't blow your cool, because if you blow your coöl and panic, that's exactly what your enemies want. "

It was when the Weathermen took over SDS that SDS became so

vulnerable . They alienated their own people. And that is the name of vulnerability, you know, when your kidney gets mad at your liver. And SDS got to be like that.

Q: Do you think that was sort of in the script, for Weathermen to take over SDS ? Was that sort of the inescapable logic of SDS, or was that something that might have been different ?

Oglesby: I think it might have been very different. And if I have any bad feelings about my own part in it, I think that I had the ball in my hands, with a second left on the clock, and I blew it. I didn't know what was happening. I started taking things personally. I felt that I was being personally rejected, and unfairly so.

But I still got more votes than anybody else did on that SDS slate at Michigan State in 1968, which was the last election we had. By that time, I had been denounced up one side and down the other, as the moderate, the liberal in SDS. I think most SDS people were moderate and liberal and centrist, like me, and I think that that movement grew, not so much of a sense of an empty Left but out of a sense of an empty center. It was the center that had collapsed, in American politics. That sane, normal, everyday, commonsensical place where you don't have to come with ideological stickers to talk about issues.

And I'm not an anti-ideological person or anti-philosophical. You know that. It's not that I'm trying to get people down to gut level intuitive responses, but I do think there's a point at which ideological encumbrances make it harder to talk, especially to people who don't already believe what you do. I think the center was always SDS's right place, that it was a movement to create a radical center, that came through on all the constitutional and traditional

values. Didn't introduce a single new thing. Harking back to the Forefathers, the Founding Fathers, Jefferson much more than Marx or Lenin or Trotsky. Jefferson was the father of SDS, philosophically speaking, and then a raft of heroes all through America's history, but people never coming from the far Left. We didn't read -- who ? Bayard Rustin ? We didn't read Bayard Rustin. We didn't read Norman Thomas. Norman Thomas, he was even one of our directors, League for Industrial Democracy. Nobody paid any attention to that. It was not the Socialist movement. It was a democratic movement. But you don't have to be a liberal even to be pro-democracy . In fact, I think Western conservatives are supposed to be pro-democracy. And it was constitutionalist, one man one vote. You can't get more constitutionalist than that. It didn't say, let's amend the Constitution or throw the Constitution out.

None of that. It was a centrist movement, radical only because in a philosophic sense it wanted to ask, what is the relationship between bad policy and bad democratic practice ? And it said, there is a relationship. If you get bad democratic practice, bad policy will come out, because elites always give you bad policy. The only way to make policy good is to involve the people in the making of a decision, from the beginning all the way through. To the extent that the decision affects their lives, it's their decision to make, to be involved in, to help make.

That's not radical. It beggars the language to call this a radical movement or even a Left wing movement, except in the sense that democracy is sort of on the Left, just by some convention, but it's a very hollow term when applied to SDS.

Yes, it applies technically, that we were-- OK, New Left. But there was something very distinctively un-Left wing about it. And I say that if you just purged the vocabulary of terms that are improperly used, or that don't mean in this context what they do in other contexts, then the best way to describe SDS is that it was a radical centrist movement, trying to restore the gaping hole that had emerged at the center of American politics with the assassination of Kennedy, with the illegal crap around Cuba that was happening around the same time, and then with this undeclared war in Vietnam.

The movement was an assertion of traditional centrist values against extremists at the top of the power system. It was Lyndon Johnson who was alienated, not youth. Nixon was alienated. I wasn't alienated. You know, I was never alienated a half second of my whole life ! "It's my bloody fucking country, asshole, " that was my asttitude. "Get away from me. YOU go back to Russia. "
"So's your grandma. "

And yet so many of us, I think it's the Jewish influence, accepted the badge of alienation, and wore it almost as if it were something to be proud of. Of course, I think that the Jewish sensibility tends to be an alienated sensibility, the "Wandering Jew, " the diaspora, all of these reasons, the sense the Jewish people have of a family beyond the family, or of a nation beyond the nation. There was considerable alienation among the Jewish kids. But that was an expression of their Jewishness, praise the Lord, and not so much an expression of a considered, well thought through political opinion. It was cultural and psychological , not political.

Q: Was there a difference, it's --one of the things that's interesting

to me, particularly when I look back at my Ann Arbor work, is the mixture. I spoke about Christians and Jews. This can be very interesting. I'd like to see what someone makes of the mix, Christian tradition and Jewish tradition, in the New Left. But I haven't seen anybody do that.

Oglesby: It would be impossible. You'd offend everybody. Because I think that the Jewish kids were , in a way, being converted. I mean, all the rituals of the movement, especially the civil rights movement, were very fundamentally Christian. That whole bit of holding hands and "We shall overcome, " and "Light one little candle. " all that is like from the belly of fundamentalist Christianity, and right from the center , you know, of the American experience. I think that the Jewish kids sensed that and they liked it and they wanted more of it, and that when Paul Booth stood up in that SDS meeting -- it was the one where I got elected, it was 1965 in Kewadin, -- when Paul Booth stood up and said, "I have an important announcement to make. For the first time there are more gentiles than Jews in SDS. "

All the Jews said, "Hurray!" This was good. Because they felt this was good, because they didn't want it to be an isolated Jewish thing, they wanted it to spread out into the middle of the society, and to speak to everyone.

That's not an alienated consciousness. That's a consciousness that wants to overcome alienation and get back home.

And I thought, boy, that was our strength. As long as we were coming out of that -- it was Christian, it was revivalistic even in some senses, it was a quality of born-againness to it. Yesterday you were a jock who lived in a frat and beat up on

hippies, and tomorrow you're going to be on the picket line battling the pigs, on behalf of the Vietnamese people and your black brothers and sisters.

I call that a born-again experience, you know, a salvation, kind of flipflop of the personality. That happened a lot. I remember there were several chapters in the Southwest that were born straight out of Young Americans for Freedom chapters, or Young Republicans or some such thing as that. Kids who came into it with, you know,that sort of frontierist, individualistic ethic, which may be kind of passe, but healthy in a lot of respects. And when you invited them to think about what was really happening in Washington and the war, in the light of the values that they said they professed, then it was easy to draw out the conclusion that they couldn't support the war. There was nothing conservative about supporting the war.

Once you got past anti-Communism, which is a big stumbling block for most people.

Q: Yes. Embedded.

Oglesby: And deeply embedded. And I think it finally wins out. There's too much momentum behind that. I don't see anybody ever --

Q: Weathermen in some ways is the direct opposite of that. I mean, the emobiment of that alienation.

Oglesby: You could even schematize it that way. That the movement got alienated by the assassinations of '68 in much the same way that it had gotten motivated by the assassination of '63.

Q: What do you mean ?

Oglesby : Well -- yes, it's good that you challenged that, because I'm talking more or less personally there. I think it was (John F.) Kennedy's assassination that blew me out of Sunnyside Street, and Bendix Systems Division, and you know, the comfortable life that I could have looked forward to. I think sometimes : what would I have done if this hadn't happened ? I would have got a degree at Michigan, either in philosophy working with Fritchof or probably out of the theatre department. And then I would have gotten a job some place in some school and taught play writing and play reading and directing and who knows ? That is what I would have been .

Q: Do you wish that that had happened ?

Oglesby:- Oh, I miss it. I would like to know what my life could have been like if it had just been straight, if I hadn't been pushed into this funny -- or dropped or whatever -- on the head at the age of 29 --

Yes, sure, and I don't say that with regrets. But on the other hand, I'm very aware that my life is the result of an accident, and an accident by definition is something that might not have happened. It wasn't essential, didn't have to happen, might have happened to the guy next door.

There were so many, so many coincidences, as I look back, that had to line up, one little fragile thing leading to another little frail thing, and something else that might not have happened if it just had been five minutes later --

You know, I can't make a case for Destiny here, unless that's what Destiny is. Tiny little insignificant steps that lead you into a tumultuous decision. But I never felt that it was -- I just

very -- it was Kennedy, when I look back. It was just, the death of (JF) Kennedy scared the shit out of me, and the way those guys at Bendix cracked the scotch open, that afternoon, that Friday afternoon , when he got killed.

That was my first , probably my first little tangle with authority. I went running down to the personnel office, Tony Proccicini, and I said, "Tony, the President is dead! Put the flag at half staff. Send George the guard out to bring the flag down. "

Tony was pretty happy at that moment, because this Kennedy had taken away some contracts. We had been working on something called the Eagle Missile system which was to go on board an airplane which wasn't even under contract yet, and Kennedy, trying to cut the budget, had thought, "Well, let's cut the Eagle Missile system, because even if we had it we couldn't do anything with it now. "

This bothered people at Bendix, because it was many millions of dollars, development contract which would have gone on into production and made the company a lot of money.

People got sore at him for cutting that. And you wanted to say, "Wait, isn't this supposed to be for national defense ? And if it's for national defense, how can we introduce into the debate the criterion of our corporate profitability ? What does that have to do with national security? "

No, people don't want to hear that, you know, the national security freaks. Uh uh, no way. National security is plain and simple, it means the scoop of ice cream in the cone, that's what it is, and if they lose that, they lose the goodies, they don't have any more interest in it.

That is it, that does it - - I mean, there's the alienation. In fact, I think you could flip the whole concept of alienation , as it's generally applied to the movement, and make a startling compelling re-interpretation of the whole period.

The whole country was alienated. Nobody believed in it. The business community had lost faith, if it ever had any. The political system had lost faith. The politicians. They had all lost faith. They didn't have any faith in democracy. They didn't have any faith in the Constitution. They didn't apply it to black people so they must not have had faith. They didn't have any faith in dialogue.

They were the alienated ones. And the movement emerged from the center, from the marrow of the American tradition, to fight against that, to declare .....

Tape # 1 , side 2

I think there's a real consensus now in the Army, I don't know about the rest of the military, but it's probably true throughout the military, on the lessons of Vietnam. They are very like what we were saying in the movement. Of course, the military puts it their own way, but you can pull together remarks from speeches by, say, General Myers who's vice-chairman of the Army, I guess he's chief of staff now, and General Vessey, another heavy duty one, and there's this guy Colonel Harry Sumers who's written a book called ON STRATEGY that got very widely reviewed last year, early this year, and is widely regarded as the intellectual soldier's reflection on Vietnam.

And what it comes down to, what these guys are saying is , and you find this very much reflected in Weinberger in the dispute that's going on between Weinberger and Schultz. Weinberger's position is

coming straight out of the War College, I think.

First, you can never get anywhere in a war in that situation unless the government that you're trying to help has the authentic support of the people. I agree with that. Lessons of Vietnam.

Point number 2, you can never send American soldiers over there on the end of a string like that to fight in those kinds of circumstances, when the people back home don't know what they're doing and don't have sympathetic support for the cause.

So those are, you could repackage those ideas in a variety of ways, but I think that would come down to a couple of lessons that everybody could agree on. If the Army says that, hey, I'm willing to dialogue. You know. Because I think that's true, and it betrays a certain realism, for them to be able to see that.

So, since all along our position was that it wasn't the military, it was the political system that led us astray in Vietnam, why go on and continue to act as if the military is the enemy?

This thing of lecturing out there happened first because I was covering a seminar at Harvard, a two month long seminar that had a room full of admirals and generals in it, National Security stuff, and they had a panel one day, which I just watched because I was covering it, with some liberal types dealing with certain kinds of public issues in just the most, I don't know, stupifyingly predictable way. It was like, you know this guy Arthur Miller, an attorney, at the Harvard -- he's around here, there's no reason that you would know him. Anyway he set up a little panel, somebody from the GLOBE, somebody from Channel 4, who knows what, and they were to talk about, given this hypothetical, that some bunch of nuts like movement type nuts had taken over the local nuclear plant, and you are a reporter and

you happen to know the leader of the group from before, and he calls you and wants to go and have a secret meeting with you some place, do you tell the people who are managing the emergency ?

Well, they all said, "No, we'd just go right ahead and talk to the dude. "

"Well, would you feel any obligation to tell the people who were managing the emergency what you found out ?

"No. They'd read it in the papers."

And I'm saying, "This is every fucking bonehead cliche that these conservatives have been trained to think about Harvard, about the Kremlin-on-the-Charles, about liberal journalists," And I knew from my own experience that it wasn't true. And I wouldn't have acted like that. I wouldn't have done it, and I didn't see any reason, why would anybody find a philosophical reason for not telling the command central in an emergency some information that might be important ?

So after that panel was over, I went up to this guy who was running the thing, who had brought me into it, guy by the name of Doug Johnston who's become a real good friend of mine. He was the youngest commander of an attack submarine ever in the Navy. Real Right Stuff kind of guy.

And I said, "Doug, this is wrong, for these guys to go away from this place with that impression of what it's all about. I can think of three or four examples from my own experience that directly contradict what they were trying to say " -- incidents like, where I didn't, not like so much collaborate with CIA, but when I went into Hue in Vietnam in 1965, it was through the local CIA guys that I got into contact with Viet Cong. Sure. And when I was going to Cuba in 1969, it was through the help of the LIFE MAGAZINE guy in

Mexico City, an agency man, that I was able to cut through the impossible red tape in Mexico City and get over to Havana.

There were other things like this too. I think you know the story of my fooling around with the Soviet diplomat, did you read my PLAYBOY piece ?

Q: No, I haven't seen that.

Oglesby: I'll give you a copy of that before you go. But anyway, I have a set of four or five little examples of how you didn't need to let political differences over issues obscure the fact that you were still basically on the same team, and citizens of the same country, and presumably shared the same basic values. And I never had any trouble at all with that angle, because I'd talk with anybody, just be up front about it.

The CIA guy in Hue got me through to the VC, and so when I came back, I talked to him about what I found out. What did I find out ? Hey, they're just like us, they're just kids from any American university. They wear white shirts with the sleeves rolled up halfway on their arms, and they know about the Beatles, and they just want to be happy. And it was good for the CIA to get that kind of an input. Just as it was good for me to have access through the CIA to people that I couldn't have got to in any other way.

So I made a speech to these admirals and generals to that effect, saying that I didn't think that it was necessary for us to ground our differences in cosmic absolutes. We're just people walking down the road, happen to see the same incident, get involved in it, came at it from different angles and saw it in a different way, argued about it. OK, we argued about it. Good. We had the argument.

The argument is still going on, but basically it's over. And we can have the humanity to continue to respect each other , and assume that everybody was doing what they're doing out of some sense that it was necessary or at least correct.

And these birds really responded to that. They asked me to come back to give a luncheon talk, which I did a few days after that, and then one of them invited me to come to the National Defense University in Washington. I did that. Then General Butch Saint, who is now the head of the Third Army over in Europe, and will probably be Army Chief of Staff within five or six years, he asked me to come out to the War College, Leavenworth, which he was running at that time. It was his duty tour.

So I did it, and with some trepidation. Boy, it was quite an audience. There'll be 2000 people there in any one class, majors and colonels who are the cream and are being groomed at this War College, both in tactical arts of combat, and also in the political stuff that you've got to know if you're going to hold down a sensitive position in Brussels some day.

Then out of the 2000 there is a further elite of 80 or so who are in what they call the Political Club, and that's the lecture audience.

Q: That's really very interesting.

Oglesby: It was fascinating, especially that first year when I had no idea what to expect. I didn't know if I was going to get crucified, boiled in oil or whatever. But it turned out to be just a terrific exchange, and I mean, these guys are just other people, like anybody else, and they don't know any more than anybody else does. They know

what everybody knows. I mean, they're very up to speed, bright. But forthcoming, not mean, not resentful. Most of them had been in Vietnam. They had been lieutenants and captains. And here we were, ten years later.

It was good. I felt it was very healing, for me. I really liked doing it.

Q: What was their perspective on the war at this point ?

Oglesby: It was -- we see it in Weinberger. The military is saying, "Listen, if you're going to give us an assignment, then tell us what it is you want done, and none of this ambiguous stuff. Give us a clear objective, and we'll come back to you with what we need to secure those objectives, then you give us what we need and then we'll go do it."

I mean, it's silly. They're never going to get that.

Q: Yes, I was just thinking, it's hard to imagine.

Oglesby: They want World War II again, as they remember it. World War II actually was in the beginning quite ambiguous. Especially as to which side we should be on. That was a heavy ambiguity, until pretty close to the last minute.

Q: Yes,it seems like the ideal military situation is that kind of situation.

Oglesby: Front lines. The technology of previous war applies.

Q: I was real interested in what we were talking about, about the American-- in some ways positing the sixties as conflict over what America was about. And who , in some ways the movement calling for

not necessarily a return, but raising questions about the current state, in light of what we call American tradition or American values. That topic has been really interesting to me. There's one book that's written sort of along those lines, by Sam Huntington.

Oglesby: Sam Huntington ?

Q: Yes. I'm not sure what -- I mean, there's some stuff he's written that I really get appalled by, but , I can't remember the name of this now, I read it this summer, which was an argument along those lines in some ways.

Oglesby: Along which lines ?

Q: Along the lines of, viewed the New Left as in some ways -- that it was fundamentally American and was best understood as an attempt to resolve the tension between American values, traditional American values , and the practice , you know, that betrayed those American ethics, something that's happened any number of times, half a dozen times in history.

Oglesby: The Populism, related to -- ?

Q: --yes. I think his history is weak. He stretches things. As I know more about history I'm a little suspicious about some of his history, particularly his late 19th century stuff. I think he's weak. But it's an interesting argument. What he doesn't do, he doesn't explain really why this happened at this time, what was particular about the New Left.

Oglesby: I'm coming more and more to think that it was Kennedy that

started the whole damned thing. If it hadn't been for that, the SDS would just have stayed a little debating society, like it had been before.

Q: I think it's a combination of Kennedy and the civil rights movement, that's my picture of it, because the civil rights movement gives it that form, and it's so-rooted particularly in forms, in that American Protestant tradition, and all that stuff about holding hands and -- more of the witness aspects, community, creating community, really crucial to what happened.

Oglesby: No shit. That's so true. And I'll bet that will be the hardest point to get across, in this book you're doing, because it's so different, as I understand it, so different from the European experience.

Q: What was your sense -- let's talk about that. One of the questions I ask in a study like this is, to what extent was this a similar phenomenon, to what extent was it just a coincident phenomenon ?

Oglesby: I think it wasn't coincident because it shared causes, common causes, but it wasn't similar either. The Europeans were more legitimately New Leftists. Of course, in a way, that term in its world use means simply, you're on the Left but you're not a Commie, Communist. New Left, the reason for being New instead of just Old is the difference between the Communist Party then and the Communist Party today. And I think in Europe the term therefore makes more sense, that the New Left in Europe was much more than here specific reaction against, or an attempt to transcend, the Communist Party.

Especially in France. The Communist Party in Italy was sympathetic to it. At least so I remember. I think it was a bunch of Commies who took me around Italy in '65 and showed me all over the place. It was a thing called Casa de Cultura which I think is a Commie front.

But in France the Communist Party was highly antipathetic to the student movement and didn't enjoy it until, famously, May '68, and for only a brief time. And it could mean Maoism in the European context, the New Left.

In fact, I think PL was an attempt to create a Maoist definition of the New Left. But it didn't have anything to do with where people where actually coming from, didn't speak to their conditions, didn't answer their needs. There was no poetry to it. It wouldn't have aroused anybody. They saw it had the negative virtue of not being Communist, but you don't make a movement out of that kind of thing.

But in Europe, where the Communist Parties were real, are real, had an important seat at the table, it made some sense to rebel against them. But here, you know, it didn't have that.

Q: You had quite a bit of contact with European groups right ?

Oglesby: Yes, for a space of a couple of years.

Q: Can you tell me stories that help me understand what we're talking about ?

Oglesby: Geez, I'd really have to dive. I think that the place I would look for those stories would probably be in Copenhagen and Stockholm experiences around (Bertrand) Russell, (Jean Paul) Sartre, tribunal.

QHow did you happen to wind up going to that ?

Oglesby: I'm not sure I remember. I was in Yellow Springs, teaching at Antioch as the radical in residence, and Beth and I and the kids were living in a little apartment behind the Peace and Freedom Center. One evening a phone call came from Staughton Lynd, who had been in contact I guess with the organizers of the Tribunal, and they had asked him for suggestions as to what Americans should be members of it and he had recommended me among others, and was calling to ask if I would do it.

I'm too curious to say no. I mean, the chance to see Sartre close up, along with all the other luminaries who were in that, was too good to pass up. Although generally speaking I was against those things. I've debated against (Tom) Hayden a lot, for going to North Vietnam, and I didn't want us to go to Cuba, though I went to Cuba too.

Q: Because "?

Oglesby: Well, I didn't think we needed it. It seemed like baiting people, to do that. You go to South Vietnam. Why go to North Vietnam ? Why allow officials in Hanoi to exploit you, and if you're Jane Fonda, to have you read some Godawful Tokyo Rose type speech to the troops ? Bulldickey! That's no way to get anywhere.

This is one of the reasons why I discover in my memory so much resentment against Tom Hayden. I mean, I feel like, I like Tom. I feel like, oh, he's a brother in arms and we had a good time together despite disputes, and I suppose on the whole I'm not raising questions about him as a human being, but as a leader yes, I do definitely have, I wouldn't even say doubts any more. I think that he was wrong, that he was dead wrong, that he was dead wrong often, and dead wrong

often with disastrous effects. I think that his little trip of taking Jane up to North Vietnam in 1966 -- well, he went to North Vietnam already in 1967, I think, maybe even '66. I thought that was just cockamanie. What the hell ? He had to be playing to an international audience to do a thing like that. He would never have done anything like that if he had been thinking, what effect is this going to have on the movement ? Is this going to help build the movement or retard it? Because he would have had to recognize, it would give the movement exactly the kind of problem that he complained about , when the anti-war movement first started going. He complained about the fact that now his precious little community organizers, who were absorbing 90 percent of SDS's precious little budget and producing not even 10 percent of political output, Hayden was worried that his precious little organizers were going to run into people who would accuse them of being pro-Communist. That's why he didn't want this anti-war stuff, and he threatened at a certain point, if we have an anti-war movement, then ERAP stuff is going to pull out of it. Yes, he threatened to pull out, because he didn't want to have to live with the bum rap of being Commie or pro-Commie, and he thought that if we got into the anti-war business, everybody would see it as being sympathetic to the Viet Cong, and so we would have to face that argument.

I remember trying to argue at that time, that's good, that's what organizing is. You don't run from arguments, you try to stir them up. That's why you're called an agitprop man. You agitate people by raising issues. That often means that you do things that are unpopular. That's why strikes are often unpopular in the labor movement, but then the workers come to see the big ought-to-be and the union

nevertheless and they have to strike even though they don't like it, and then they find out that nobody ever wanted it in the first place, and it gives them perspective on struggle. That's how you get people along, you engage with them, even sometimes when it's in conflict to start out with.

But no, he wanted to keep these projects free from that debate. Well, his projects nevertheless failed, for whatever reason. I think ERAP was the most glorious failure, for him glorious failure, of SDS. It was a considerable symbolic value but that's all. ERAP was symbolically valuable in doing campus organizing, and that's all it was good for. It didn't organize five community people, and it must have spent $100,000.

Q: You would say it was a total failure ?

Oglesby:: Total failure except symbolically. Symbolically, it was great, because it gave SDS a dimension, a sense of presence in the real world that it could never have had if it was seen as operating exclusively in a campus context. It projected our image beyond the campus, past campus sand lot politics to the real world of poverty, racism, police brutality. And the deep part of that is true, too. If we didn't organize five community people, we nevertheless put maybe 500 kids through a very advanced course in sociology today, as it is on the streets. There was no substitute for that. And that's probably why the community organizing tendencies are still so strong, not because of something in the community, it's because of something in the middle class.

So as long as SDS is looked at as an attempt to save the poor, it's an abysmal failure, but maybe SDS's real purpose was

to save the soul of the middle class, and in that respect it was not such an abysmal failure, and ERAP was one of the successes, but ERAP was a success for middle class college kids who were struggling to understand their world and to broaden their experience, to reach out beyond the parochial limits of their class experience and see what other people had to live.

No question about it, that was a ferocious contribution to that generation's education, and very valid on those terms, but it was never defended on those terms. It could not have been defended on those terms. It would have been booed out of court if somebody had said "This is why we're doing it. "

Q: Unimaginable. Did you think about it at all in those terms at the time ?

Oglesby: Yes. I mean, it was an explicit debate. I remember when Steve Max got up once, it was pretty early, I think this was '65, '66, as early as that -- Steve Max gets up and he makes this uproarious speech analyzing the budget of SDS in terms of political projects and results, and it was he who first dared to ask the sacriligious question, "How much money is it costing ? And b), what are we getting out of it ?"

I think the figures at that point were something like, somewhere between 60 and 80 thousand dollars had been raised, mainly from unions, and invested in the effort to generate community projets. It couldn't have been that much, could it ? That must have been the total SDS budget. But it was some countable number of bucks. You could look in the books. And it comes out to some big number.

And then the next question is, "Well, what did we get ? Do we have 80, 90, 100 poor folks here with us, making common cause,

reading their Trotsky and their Marx and their Oglesby ? "

No. One time, a community guy came, and it paralyzed everybody. It was a black guy, a big tough-looking older black guy, about 40 or so. I've been trying to remember his name. We knew him by one name, like Deac or some such thing, just call him Deac. And he was one of the guys who saw a new storefront opening up on the block, white kids in there, and he walked in to see what it was, and the white kids said, "Oh, we're just your -- this is all about you, we're organizing to save the poor and here's our leaflet, " and they had got as far with him as bringing him to the SDS National Council meeting in the winter, early 1966, University of Illinois, and it was just a disaster.

I mean, you know what SDSers are like, and the SDS conference was an auditorium full of eight, nine, ten groups of 15, 20, eight, six people, talking about South Africa, corporate development in Latin America, the War in Vietnam, VC tactics, buzz buzz buzz, talk talk talk, never an end. Never an end to it, and the distinctions, so sublte and fine. At its best it was terrific. Very bright people, those SDSers. You get a series where a Lee Webb would get up and say "Yea " and everybody would think "Yea" and then a Rob Burlage would stand up and say, "On the other hand maybe Nay, " and everybody would say, "Gee, Nay. "

I would be just like a ping pong ball, knocked back and forth by these guys. The first time I heard SDS debaters -- gee, they were great! They were real. They were not playing any games. But they were very verbal and very high key , and this guy Deac did not have the equipment or the interest in dealing with it.

And about the second day he got pretty upset, and an ugly set of incidents happened. One of them, there was this kid -- this is

very typical, kid from Texas, Bob Speck, goodhearted kid, but he'd been raised by racists. And sure, he was trying to break through it, but he hadn't all the way broken through it , or at least not in the eyes of a black guy who hears the word "nigger" coming out of this kid's mouth, and Speck was trying to make the point that there was no possible thought of racism in our group, therefore as I use the word "nigger " it's just to make a point, it's not because I think this is a way to talk to you, Sir, Mr. Black Man.

Deac was not ready for that kind of distinction. He heard this kid yammering at him about what he meant and didn't mean, and what's Deac going to say ? He couldn't talk. He punched him out. Just one -- I was looking right at it. It was amazing. There was almost nothing else moved except this guy's arm. He just went boom! and Speck was down on the floor.

Q: One punch ?

Oglesby: One punch. I mean, this guy reminded you of Sonny Liston. He was about that age, he was that color, he had that manner about him. And Jesus, there was one moment where, there was this girl, Sarah Murphy, who was from Boston I think and had been working in some of the toughest projects, and she had a background in civil rights. But she wasn't that experienced. She'd been active maybe for a year and a half or so, and she too had got enough of this talk, and in this place where we were meeting, it was a chapel, it was like on the third floor, a big chapel with a high ceiling, sort of Gothic ceiling to it. Below us, there was a regular church and then on the first floor, or down in the basement, kind of a large reception room which ran the whole length of this building, and Sarah had gone down there to take a nap on the couch, and Deac had showed up.

And it's still unclear what happened, whether he made a pass at her or actually started coming on to her. In any case, she screamed, and it was right in the middle of a plenary session up there, like midnight, 1 or 2 in the morning, people were tired, grubby, had been living for two or three days on peanut butter and jelly and beans. It was just not fun or good to be there. It was sort of blah blah, blah blah, talking..... just endless.

And suddenly, this scream! Like, I don't know how to describe it, it was like something physical, like this huge sword had gone chuk ! shot up from the floor to fill the whole room.

You know how people scream. I mean, there's -- people scream a lot of different ways, and the scream that you never forget is where it's just all out, there's nothing held back, it's at the limit of a person, like those people screaming on an airplane the other way. That was incredible . Just flat out screaming.

And she screamed like that, from down in the basement, and it echoed and just rang and it hung in the air. Cut right through the debate. Just everybody -- like ice.

Q: What happened ?

Oglesby: Well, some of us ran down there. I was unlucky. I happened to be right at the closest door and I was the first one in. I didn't know what I was going to see. I was the first one in and the closest one, and you ran out of fear of looking cowardly, probably. A big lesson about courage. "Oh my God, somebody tells me I gotta run, move, do it. "

So like a brave man I go running down the steps just like I was in a hurry, hoping that the people behind me would catch up with me

-- but I got in there, and there wasn't any-- she was in no physical danger. Well, who knows what was going on. I still don't know, if she just woke up and the guy was sort of standing over her, and she didn't know what the hell was happening and she just screamed, but--

Q: What did she say ?

Oglesby: Oh, she was so broken up. Well, she thought that -- ..... What did she say about it ? I'm trying to think. The point was that she was in no apparent physical danger, and this guy, this black guy, was so -- he didn't know what the hell was happening. He was just absolutely gone out of it.

But anyway, this long story is to illustrate the small point that the community organizing didn't get a lot done for actual community people that it was supposed to help, but it did put a lot of white kids through an experience that they could not have had any other way, and which might in fact turn out to be useful for the country, that there are for those people who went through that experience .

But the real point of the story, getting back to Hayden, was that it was for that project, which wasn't getting results, that Hayden was willing to split ERAP off from SDS , and in effect denounce SDS. Hayden never liked it that it was Students for a Democratic Society. To him, "student " was nothing, student was a big zero. If you were a student, sorry, you're not ripe. He always wanted authenticity. That, I think, was maybe his main drive, in an Existential sense. And he found authenticity in situations that people were stuck with, situations that you couldn't ge out of . Those were the real ones. Conflicts that were forced upon you, like the conflicts forced upon black people. Black people were authentic because they could not escape

their situation. Poor people were authentic. They too could not escape. But he , is a first generation middle class kid, born of working class Catholic folks, and since he doesn't have the union battles and is not poor in that old sense, he has no identity. He has no authenticity. He's not real.

Tom found a kind of psychic identity in his politics. Why not ? I mean, that's one of the good things about good politics, to help you figure out who you want to be as well as who you really are, and it can give you identity. You don't have to go to bed at night saying, "Why did I waste another day ?"

That made it very hard for Tom to understand the political importance of the student movement. To him, no matter how big a student movement would get, it would never be big enough to be important, because it was always going to be students, and students could not -- that is, could escape their situation, even if they -- I mean, why would they want to, in the first place, since they were not suffering? But they couldn't be authentic. It's as if you could only have Existential authenticity if you were fused with your circumstances, in a sense in which your circumstances defined you, and if you were fortunate enough to stand at some liberty from your circumstances, if the benefit of transcendence was to your advantage and not to the world's, then by some terrible magic you became an inauthentic person, you became a person without an identity, without a soul. You know, white people had no soul. White people had no rhythm. White people had no music.

Why ? Well, they were free. Get ~~Fritjov~~ Frichtof to work on this one. It was as though freedom nullified everything that you valued in other people. You had no struggle. You had no cause.

Q: In a way there's a parallel there with what you wrote in CONTAINMENT AND CHANGE, about the revolutionary, in some ways. I can see some resonance there in which the way you define -- maybe the revolutionary is the one who has no choice.

Oglesby: Yes. Right. And that's where Tom always wanted to get. He wanted to get to the place of having no choice, because only when he had no choice could he discover what was really in him. I think. As long as you had some control over the external world that impacted on you, you weren't really up against it, and so you could never figure out, you could never know what you were worth.

It's a very Hemingway kind of idea. And I think Tom brought it to politics in a powerful way. He brought that whole idea of politics as identity. Yet he would never talk about that. On the contrary, he eschewed it. To talk about that was more liberal studentry.

Q: That's what I was going to ask, did he articulate these ideas that you were just articulating in the course of a debate like this ?

Oglesby: No. But he was never challenged. I'm saying all this at the length of some hindsight. I'm sure I sensed a lot of it at the time, but I couldn't put it together and wouldn't have had the sense or the conscience to confront Tom about it.

I only got mad at him bit by bit. In the beginning, I didn't even know that there was-- I remember finding out that Tom was threatening to take ERAP out of SDS, and I was still so new at the organization, even though I was the president of it, that I didn't really feel justified in getting involved in that debate, except maybe as a carrier of messages, or as a friend of both sides trying to keep the organization together.

Q: Who was on the other side ?

Oglesby: With Tom ?

Q: On the other side, opposed to Tom ?

Oglesby: Who was on my side? Todd Gitlin, for example. Todd Gitlin was never afraid of student power, and then there was the guy Carl Davidson, who coined the phrase, more or less, who tried to shematically turn the students into a kind of proletariat, and by that sort of sleight of hand, restore the validity of normal Marxist argument, or I would say, crude, vulgar Marxism.

So Carl Davidson would have been big on students. But that was later, when students had just taken it over . I mean, there was no --there was a student movement, and it was growing. You didn't spend a nickel on it and it grew. It was like a weed. And all the money you threw at the poor people, they never quite got the point. They never quite had the spirit for sustained collective action.

Maybe there's some reason for that. I don't know.

Q: What do you think it is /?

Oglesby: Well, I 'm thinking that the thesis of city populism seemed on the face to be so sound, and yet never really did prove out, in the actual test. Still people continued to believe in it because it was so sound. It was an idea that was so logical that it didn't matter if it was unrealistic. But it was unrealistic.

Q: Do you think it was unrealistic or just proven wrong as experiment ?

Oglesby: All right, fair enough. It wasn't unrealistic in the beginning, and it looked pretty good in the beginning. As I said, it gave SDS a cachet or depth , a sparkle, a sense of independence from the campus,

that it couldn't have had by any other thing -- except civil rights stuff. I take that back. The civil rights stuff brought that, too. Although that was almost the same thing, you know, just drawn with a different color. It was the black folk are the ones who cannot change their circumstances and therefore they're the authentic ones, go be with them, you'll be real and authentic too.

Nobody put it like that, because nobody was saying, " Go to Selma and save your soul. "

Q: It seems there's also a difference there, in that the black movement actually , certainly up to '65, was making strides and was a self-generated movement, and the experience of that has to be quite different from the experience of being in a community, a disorganized poverty-stricken community where people are exactly the opposite of being organized. You know. That was probably quite a different mode. In some ways one of the parallels I think about white students getting that kind of crash course ,is very much the case. That's my sense.

But that moment, I hadn't really thought about that but that must have been very -- it seems like that's sort of --.....

Tape # 2, side 3 [sic]

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Q: .... where was it revolutionary ?

Oglesby: Well, it came in bits and pieces, because there wasn't that much clarity that there was going to be a war. One of the objections to getting involved in an anti-war movement was that the war was going to go away and then where would you be ? Everybody just assumed that because the war looked so unreasonable to us, that it would look unreasonable to the guys who wanted to fight it.

So it was never, the issue was never resolved all at once in any definitive way. I don't think there was even that much focussed awareness of it at the time.

There was this one moment, yes. There was this one moment at sort of a small governing committee of SDS , 20 or 30 people sitting around in a circle in a classroom somewhere in 1965, and God, I wish I had that meeting verbatim, because somebody is bitching and moaning-- it wasn't Tom, but it was somebody in this group -- about the anti-war movement, and saying, "You're all so childish, you're into all this dumb demonstration stuff. Meanwhile we ERAPers, " who had a totally different manner about them, they dressed differently, they looked different, they used different kind of speech -- "We ERAPers, the authentic ones here, are over there trying to do this quiet, difficult but serious and significant work, while you all are back there at the campus, maybe once a month kicking over the ~~traces~~ tables about Vietnam, and not doing anything but making a lot of trouble for us, your brothers and sisters who are out there trying to get real work done. "

"So we think that we maybe have to leave this organization, if it's going to insist on pushing this anti-war stuff. "

I remember having a long long look across the table at Todd Gitlin, because he felt about it the way I did. That would have been very bad for SDS, to break it up. So I remember making a kind of a longish speech in which I was trying to propose a synthesis, and it actually was true. I was organizing all the time against the war. That is what I organized against. And at the end of the debates and the speeches and round tables, the kids who were persuaded by you would come up and say, "What can I do ? How are we ever going to change things ?"

Answer; "Go out and work aginst poverty, go work against racism, knowing that these are blows against the empire, blows against the Vietnam War. You can strike a blow against the Vietnam War by organizing some welfare mother in Detroit. "

Now, I don't think that was really true, as a practical matter, as a descrption of a process in reality. I don't think that that was correct. It was a proposition, it was logical and reasonable, it might have been correct. In some other time and place, it could be correct again. But then and there, it wasn't. You were not striking a blow against the war by organizing the welfare mother in Detroit. You only thought you were. If you really wanted to strike a blow against the war, you would be working on the campuses, because it was the campuses that were generating the enormous heat, the enormous pressure, the enormous growth, and really shaping the political.

But even if it was wrong, it was still pretty, and it gave SDS a charisma, to think, gee, they have thought it through that far, that they can see the connection between Vietnam and poverty in our own back yard and racism.

And that's where SDS was very strong, was in linking the issues and showing that you were really working for one justice, no matter what avenue you followed in particular.

And that held it. I mean, that held the line. People stayed together. That was sort of the line that was finally worked out and adopted, that yes, you were, the important stuff was in the cities, in the communities, but you started people towards that path by talking about Vietnam.

Q: How did that ... not really a decision, but decision, how did that --

Oglesby: How did that -- ? Well, silence. Silence is always what signified a consensus. When nobody had anything to say any more. You sort of knew that whatever was the sum and synthesis of the thing that had been set up at that point was what you now believed and what you'd want to do. So there was never any formal debate over whether SDS would stay together or split up, except in that room, where it really wasn't a debate, it was like almost an ultimatum coming down from the serious side, the more grown-up side of SDS, the Hayden side of it.

But to come back to Hayden, the reason I thought of this in the first place is that it strikes me as , well, as an irony at least, that when Tom was organizing in the communities, he didn't want people to organize about Vietnam because that would provide a burden for him that was extra. Yet when he got into the anti-war business, right off he goes to North Vietnam ! Right off he goes to their damn radio, puts Jane Fonda on a live mike in Hanoi. Hey, Tom! Remember what you said about creating problems ? I don't need to explain why you're in Hanoi! I don't need that. I don't need to explain what Jane Fonda had in her God damn so called alleged mind,when she let the Vietnamese use her tha way. Holy God !

I'd rather talk about, why are we in Vietnam ? Why shouldn't we be there ? I'd rather talk about that. I don't want to talk about Jane Fonda and whether it was right or wrong for her to --

But then, I can turn back on that and use the same arguments that I used on Tom before. That's what the agitprop guy does, he goes a little bit too far, and in that way stretches people's heads. Sure, some of them are going to get pissed and say "Fuck you all " and just

leave and not have anything more to do with you, but the gamble is that more of them and better ones will be detained and will reflect on it a while and see the prejudice in his first reaction and decide to change.

Still and all, I can see no justification for what they did in Hanoi.

Q: On other levels it seems you guys are really swinging around each other, in different ways, having it based through that --

Oglesby: -- that's coming out in this book, too, WHO SPOKE UP. I can see it in there. Of course, she didn't like Hayden. She interviewed Hayden. She thinks Hayden is a pretty ordinary sort of pol. And she identified with me, because she thinks I've got a bit of a novelist in me, like her. So -- it's easy for me to be her hero, because I'm the head of the Lit Major group. And Hayden is the Sociology group.

Q: That meeting, I'm really struck by this. It's what she alluded to, I haven't looked at that very carefully --

Oglesby: Which meeting ?

Q: About that discussion. I guess what I'm thinking about is what the effect of that was then on the organization and on what you did . Not having a consensus that the war was crucial.

Oglesby: Oh, we did have a consensus. The failure of the consensus was in the leadership belief.

Q:OK, that's what I was speaking of, within that leadership group, they made a decision that the war is only an avenue to --

Oglesby: SDS, so much is said about it, politics by consensus, but it

wasn't politics by consensus, it was politics by impulse, and most of the things that we did happened because, against everybody else's druthers, some flunky would go off and do something that would put people on a spot.

Like, this is how Mark Rudd organized the takeover at Columbia. He comes to the SDS meeting, 300 kids at it, with two or three of his Mermydons, and he says, "We've got to go take over the president's office. "

And people say, "Shut the fuck up, you madman? "

He says, "All right. You guys are not serious. I won't have anything more to do with you. I'm taking over the president's office, " and he and five, ten or fifteen, maybe tweny people who had been on his side out of the 300, would go off and take over the president's office. "

Then, "Well, I guess we'd better go. " That's how things --

Q: Is that the way it operated at the national level also ?

Oglesby: Yes. Like Hayden says, as I remmber it, he said basically, "Whatever you do doesn't make any difference to me. I don't think that it is real politics. I think it's sandlot, its studentry, you're not going to stop the war. Whatever you do, I am going to go off to Newark and organize poor people. Somebody else will do the same in other cities. We'll finally, inkblot-like, grow together, we'll have a national movement of poor people -- then we can talk to the Democratic Party. We can say : Lookit here, we've got a big constituency that was never organized before, that's how many million votes ? We can deliver them. So let us into the Democratic Party. We'll be the left wing of the Democratic Party. "

That's Tom's objective from the beginning. Not to make a revolution or Socialism or anything like that. I think this was good, in his politics, that he always saw the movement as coming to the political event, coming to the point where it would, if it were successful it would return to conventional electoral politics, through the Democratic Party, the difference being that its time in the wilderness had allowed it to build an independent strength such as you wouldn't go into the Democratic Party purely as a supplicant, you would have some quid pro quo, and this made it realistic to think that you could pull the center of the Democratic Party to the left. That's Hayden's politics. That's the politics of Tom Hayden, of Al Haber, of Mark Pilisuk -- just the whole generation, Paul Potter, I think. He was much more mystical but he was into the same head. In real political terms, that was to be the projected development of the movement.

You get kids out of school, send them to communities, get the communities organized, linked up, go to the Democrats and present some demands and something that you can give in exchange.

Q: What's wrong with that ?

Oglesby: Nothing. That was groovy and great. That's what happened. It was starting to bear fruit already in 1968, when Business International executives sent a little probe over to SDS to see where we would go.

Now, I have heard a more sinister interpretation of that, was that Business International people wanted to know what SDS would do, made as if, made you think that they wanted you to be for the system and to back Bobby Kennedy, but in fact, they were just wondering, was Bobby Kennedy going to be a serious problem, Presidentially

speaking ? And if he got these kids off the streets and into conventional politics, gee, try beating the Pied Piper in an electoral contest. Maybe because we said, "Yes, " we would help Kennedy, is why somebody decided that Kennedy had to die. If Kennedy has been running against the movement, certainly he would have been a much less powerful candidate.

Q: I got a copy of this thing he? you wrote --

Oglesby: Oh, you got that -- Deep stuff.

Q: Do you have a copy there, would you like this ?

Oglesby: No, I have this, thanks anyway. I have this stuff pretty well collected. This is what Mike Klonsky got on me about. Yes. This is why he thought I was a dangerous man, because I was leading the movement to the right. He was right. I always thought that was the way it should go, it should go to the organized right, anything else didn't make any sense to me. What was the left ?

Q: It seems there was a group in SDS whose dialogue is more with the Left, Left tradition, their ideas of what the Left should be. And that's in some ways an entirely different debate than like with Hayden. I mean he gets mixed up in it in different ways, but it seems like that becomes more and more important, that group's rhetoric comes to dominate the organization at some point

Oglesby : Certainly the more irrelevant the organization became, the more predominant this theoretical dispute, and the more theoretical the dispute became, the more focussed on conventional Left wing ideas.

Q: Why do you think there was an attraction to Marxism ?

Into Marxist language ....

Oglesby: I think I try to explain that in there, but I'm not sure. Some place or other I've said , because I just saw it quoted recently, I said , I don't ordinarily quote myself but I happened to like that, gee, I said that ? Didn't know I knew that much. That the attraction of Marxism was based on the fact that it was the only coherent philosophy of revolution on the shelf. Nobody else had tried semantically to think about where it came from, where it was headed, what was the ideology of this process that seemed to dominate history for the last two centuries or more, and that fact, all by itself, was immensely powerful. If you get interested in the subject of revolution, in other words, you were bound to run into Marx or the neo-Marixsts. In fact, there's no way to avoid that, and you have to deal with Marxism, a serious grown-up mature philosophy. Whether you think it's right or not, it's still powerful, and there isn't anything else. What is the alternative?

Sure, there are the non-Marxists, the anti-Leninists on the Left, and you come to discover these people. You know, the Kropotkins and those beautiful anarchists. And you discover, after a while, that the Bolsheviks maybe weren't the best ones. Maybe you learn to identify with the Mensheviks or the Cadets or, you know, various more moderate groups in the revolution. But you don't learn about these people from themselves or any tradition that they themselves established. You learn about them through Marxism, because of the Marxist tradition. It's like Marxism is the philosophy of revolution, and in an era of revolution, in an epoch of revolution, whichever is the longest, centuries of revolution, that's going to make it an important philosophical discipline, whether it's good, whether it has sound detailed arguments

or not. People will be brought to it. Whether it has a sound prognosis.

I think that's why people went to Marx. It's because that was the only game in town, if you wanted to talk about these questions.

Q: Do you think it had to be that sort of -- I'm thinking about the -- what that means, in terms of the history of the movement.

Oglesby: Well, the movement, remember, as such, didn't have to worry about revolution until , well, I can't say late, but it never got to be a very hot topic until, what ? '67, '68, around in there. And really, one talked about revolution to begin with because the Vietnamese were having a revolution, or because the Cubans had had a revolution, and then, by a glimmer of analogy which may not have been that sound but was certainly polemically strong, it was something to blast people with. People would pose the problem : how do we think about the black movement in the United States in terms of revolutionary models ? Is there a pardigm of the revolutionary society, of the revolutionary personality, by means of which we can see the similarities between a Ben Barker and a Robert Moses ?

But then later on as the discussion got heated, people more and more started to think, well, what would we be if we were revolutionaries ? If we students, if we middle classniks became revolutionary in some sense, what would that suggest about the structure of society, about the student's role in the economy, and on and on ?

And that's when people started throwing around some of these very heavy and often rather bizarre theories, about the importance of students as the new working class or the new proletariat or as the technical proletariat. At Columbia there was the parxis axis, which

theorized endlessly about the role of students in the production process of a high tech society, and which suggested that the political clout of students was a reflection of their ultimate importance as a certain kind of producer or proletarian in the newly emerging society.

That was a bag of baloney, too, but it was a good idea. I mean, it was something worth staying up a few nights about, and publishing papers about, and it was a way to focus on the situation of the student.

But the premise was wrong , the premise being that it's your value to the overall production process that determines your power in the political system that governs it. That's a faulty premise. It's more like your replaceability that determines it. I mean, you might be very important, and very easily replaceable, you might do a job that just has to be done, otherwise everything goes to hell, and yet you could get anybody to do it.

Picking up the trash. Cities where the trash doesn't get picked up are unliveable after two or three weeks. But it's nothing to pick up trash. So just because students were discovering that they had a role in the producing economy was no reason for them to start thinking that they therefore had status in its political culture. The question about that was going to be not only the importance but the replaceability of the student.

But in any case, these arguments certainly flourished. It was that period of very eager introspection, collective introspection into the status of the student in the modern economy, especially after May '68 in France, which made people think that it wasn't at all so cracy to think there could be a revolution in a modern developed industrial country. It had come within a whisker of happening in

France. Who was to say that if events kept developing as they were in 1968, that the same thing couldn't be seen here ?

I mean, it became after 1968, somehow, suddenly, a plausible idea -- revolution in the mother countries of the world, revolution in the West. And revolution in which somehow a leading role would be played by students.

Q: It seems like in some sense that's a lot of what this piece is about, towards the end.

Oglesby: How so ?

Q: Well, you know, in some ways, trying to discuss or trying to envision what would be the possible roles and what would be a possible analysis, and sort of experimenting with that in the context of the history of the sixties, in your own reflections about it, what we learned about this question from this last ten years. And not coming out with a simple answer,oh yes, this is it.

Oglesby: Right. I wish I had. I did have an answer, which was Cuba. The answer that I proposed to the doldrums that -- it wasn't doldrums, to the obstruction of the movement, the fact that everything was jammed up now around Vietnam -- I mean, and civil rights both -- we'd gone strong with King and King got killed. You went strong around the movement against the war, Bobby Kennedy killed. What do you do next ?

The Weatherman response was, and the Black Power, was essentially to say, you up the ante. You escalate the level of violence. This was the strategy and the tactics was trashing.

As you well know, I didn't agree with that, and the alternative that I proposed to the Weathermen was the Venceremos Brigade.

Have we ever talked about that ?

Q: No.

Oglesby: I had just moved out to San Francisco with my wife and my family at the end of 1968. Things were pretty tough out there. Very active situation. San Francisco State was going off, I think, and there was always something at Berkeley. The Bay Area was just constantly alive with political action, but at the same time I really didn't find a way to fit into it. They didn't have a great need for lawyer types, for people to make speeches and win arguments. There were a lot of people like that out there.

In any case, the Weather group had moved into Chicago, and one of the things that they were debating was my status, because I was a member of that group. As I mentioned before, I got a lot of votes, more votes than any of them did. I got more votes than anybody the last -- at that East Lansing thing in 1968, when I was on the slate that the Weathermen organized in order to stop PL.

Well, Bernardine (Dohrn) calls one day, and she says, "We've been having a big debate about you. There are a lot of people around here who say that you have made your contribution and you now have nothing else to say or do and you should sort of retire yourself. "

She says, "I'm not one of those people. I think that you're potentially a fine revolutionary. "

And she says, "This is why I want you to accept an offer, " or "We are telling you to accept , we are directing you, the group here has decided that you will do this, and we are into democratic centralism" or some such thing " at this point, being very disciplined, we're into being disciplined."

I had been pushing for that myself, for being more disciplined, because there were a lot of loose cannons in that group, and the FBI, as is now clear in retrospect, was putting enormous pressure on us. This was the very midnight of the COINTELPRO season, and it wasn't just the FBI, it was all of them, all of the military guys, all the military intelligence arms, actively involved in spying and counter-intelligence work and agent provocateurism .

Did you see in the paper the other day, some Freedom of Information suit has uncovered the fact that something like a hundred and forty-four police departments in the United States had active continuing anti-Red Squads, subversive activities ? That figure, a huge number, way -- I can find the clipping, I'll show it to you.

And this was the season of all that, so it was a time to be disciplined, and now Bernardine is throwing that back at me. She says, "OK, the discipline that you've got to accept is, you're going to Cuba. "

This was a discipline because I had spoken against those kinds of things,you know, baiting the mad Yankee Imperialist, or giving him easy asguments with us that will play in Peoria, if not in New York. So she knew that I was't in favor of all this hobnobbing with officials of the Communist world. They had run off to Brataslava, a bunch of them, a little before that, I think. I didn't think that was too cool. And of course there was Hayden's stuff in North Vietnam.

I felt we should travel, but I thought we should travel to South Vietnam or travel to some Third World country like Guatemala, Colombia, which has a Fascist pig on top of it, and try to get next to the people who were hip in that situation, and build a base for them in the United States. We didn't need Fidel Castro and Ho Chi Minh. They didn't need us, I don't think. But then they did. They did. I take that back.

They needed us more than we needed them. Ho Chi Minh did need the anti-war movement, and Castro did need the New Left, to serve as a kind of a buffer, as a source of an alternative explanation within the United States.

Well, to skate through this story, Bernardine says, "You're going to Cuba because they have asked us to send someone with a name because it's their 10th anniversary celebration, and you're the one with the name, and besides you will go to Cuba and see all these great revolutionaries face to face, and this will turn you on again to the revolution, and you will come back to the United States rededicated to the struggle. "

This was Bernardine's agenda for me. And because I had been a big guy for discipline and the whole group of them had voted that I would be the one , actually several of us went -- but OK, so I'm going to Cuba.

That must have been early December or late November when Bernardine called me, and it was next month that I had to get there.

Anyway, I get down to Cuba, and we get shown the dog and pony show, and why not ? They were having a lot of people in. Of course they set up exhibits and little farms and collectives, you know, orchards and schools . Why not ? You would do it. It's open house to the world. Of course, you have some pavilions if you're going to have a fair.

But still and all, it was the official picture of Cuba, and you never knew what was being left out. There were some really poignant moments down there. Once when this gay guy, this gay Cuban, at I'm sure considerable personal risk to himself with the authorities, managed to get up to the floor that we were staying in -- a lot of American types in this, what used to be the Hilton, I think, now the

Havana Libre, and made this incredibly emotional speech to us, in which he said , "I know why you like Fidel Castro and Che Guevara and you support the Cuban Revolution, and yet I'm a revolutionary myself, I supported it and it's done all these good things, but it also is doing some monstrous things, like --people like me, gay people, what can I do ? They won't let me serve. Anything I do, they turn me aside, nothing but contempt, I'm finished. Now, in your country, you wouldn't like somebody who tolearted that. In your country, we would be allies. Fidel Castro would not come between us. If Fidel Castro tried to treat me with contempt because I'm homosexual, you would make solidarity with me and struggle against Fidel Castro. Why are you being so blind to the repression of liberties, to the suppression of intellectuals, to the punishing of people for stupid Medieval kinds of reasons ? Why are you being blind to all this ? And continuing this kind of uncritical gaga support of Castro? Why don't you look behind the surface of things ? "

It was true then. At this very time this guy, Umberto Padilla, the poet , had been denied an award or a book of his had been suppressed -- he won the award and the book was suppressed because he dared question the military leadership of Cuba.

I think most people (crosstalk) -- Yeah, I think, but there was an answer. It was an anguished and uncertain answer, but the answer was, that we think that a lot of the repression in Cuba probably takes place because of fear of the United States, which is, alas, justifiable, and maybe it should not be, the business of Western or First World radicals to criticize the failures of the revolution, especially when these failures are more or less directly attributable to the policies of our own country.

First, let's get the American Navy off Cuba's ass. First let's have an accepting or at least a non-belligerent attitude for a while from Washington . First let's get those medical supplies released. First let's exchange consulates . A lot of things that Americans had to say about Cuba, first, before they got down to the problem of homsexuals or of indeed poets, or Left wing dissenters in Cuba. And not to deny that these were still problems, but to point out that these problems existed in a perspective :

Once upon a time, the Cubans were oppressed and impoverished. Now, they're still oppressed but they're no longer impoverished. Is that or is it not an improvement ? Once upon a time, the Cuban economy was under the thumb of American corporations. Today, the Cuban political system is under the thumb of the Soviet Union. The second thing happens because of the reaction of Americans to the revolt against Batista, and yet it happens. Whatever is the process or reason that brings Castro to the alliance or dependence on the Soviet Union, that dependency nevertheless is real. Tragic, real, in any case --

Q: There's a fundamental contradiction, in a way, that being caught in that moment of both wanting, seeing the necessity of doing something here about it, that in some ways is your first resonsibility; and at the same time, discerning the flaws.

Oglesby: Yes. You really felt for this guy. He wept real tears. He was so frustrated -- why can't you see that if you were here, you'd be in trouble ? And that was the connection that a lot of people refused to make. I mean, well and good for us to be kicking up our heels in the Mother Country, but that kind of behavior was distinctly frowned on in the revolutionary ex-colonial countries.

Well, I don't know. It's just part of the dialectic. It's also the fact that the Cubans could never understand the New Left's interest in marijuana and rock and roll and sex. The Cubans were against all those. They were so damned puritanical. They would wear these starched heavy duty military uniforms, in this baking, saturating heat. I mean, it was hot even in January, so hot. I don't know how they live there. And these military types would always be so perfeclty dressed, you know, heavy olive drab things and big boots. Very well polished, but boots. 90 degrees, 95 degrees, no wind blowing. Whew!

And their music was, I mean, it seemed -- one of the highlights of the trip down there was this , we all got taken out to, is it the Tropicana ? It's this great and famous night club that had been set up by the Mafia in the Batista days, and which the Cubans had saved - - among the many things that they didn't save, this wa sort of the one symbol of the decadence that they wanted sort of to keep alive, and it wasn't open hardly at all, but they reopened it and furbished it up for the celebration, and you wouldn't believe it. It was like a time machine, and you were back in the 1940s or 1930s and you were at,you know, the Cotton Club or the Coconut Grove, and one of these tatata te da de dum swingy orchestras , I just hadn't listend to in -- and the key act was this guy who came out in a white tuxedo with sequins on the lapels and sat down at a white baby grand piano with sequins on the lid, and as he played the "Flight of the Bumblebee Boogie, " he was lifted on this hydraulic lift that sort of slowly turned him, in the play of steam that came out of these valves and colored lights -- and this, was it for this that we stormed Moncada Barracks ? Is this why the Grandma made her fateful trip ?

God! And you just wanted to say, "Oh no, the Revolution can't be

satisfied with this!

And yet it struck you at the same time, Jesus, culturaly speaking it is a kind of a childhood, and it's almost as if they have to recapitulate all the stages of Western developed culture in their own process of development, and they can't just leapfrog across our 1940s, our 1950s. They have to somehow recapitulate and subsume it into their own experience , make it theirs.

But it was a powerful experience, to be sitting there in this place watching this go down, over here representatives from, you know, East Germany, dudes from Albania sitting behind you, this great universal patter of tongues, all sitting there with our rum and cokes and watching this campy night club act. Straight, without irony.

And you wanted to say, good for them, but then you felt at the same time patronizing in that respect. You didn't want to patronize these people. Their struggle was too intense. They had too much personal dignity. And yet, not to raise the question was to be disloyal to one's own predicament, and that didn't seem worth it either. Maybe in fact you could construct a theory of repression around that. Is it that repression begins when people start in their own hearts repressing ? And proceeds to the political arena from that solitary act in which you, for whatever reason, maybe just not to have a scene, you don't tell the truth. You maybe just don't even tell a lie, you just leave the truth out, you let it stand unsaid, so somebody thinks, well, they too must like to see piano players in white tuxedos playing the "Flight of the Bumblebee Boogie, " because no one says, "I don't like it.I'm not satisfied with it. I think you jerks are blowing it. "

And we didn't learn. If the Left had leaned on the damned Sandinistas, they would have known it's not an issue of fairness here,

it's an issue of politics, how they handled their elections, how they handle opposition , and it's not politics domestically, it's politics between them and the United States.

But they didn't. They had people fawning on them again, like people had fawned on Castro before.

Hey, if you've got to fawn on somebody, Castro's a pretty good guy to fawn on. I mean, I think that he is an immense human being, and the Cuban Revolution has nothing but my sympathy. But my sympathy is not the end of my critical faculties, and I think that one has critical faculties which can cut through sympathy, for the reason that if you don't, your survival rate is going to be..... (off tape)

Tape # 2, side 4 [sic]

I felt sorry for myself for what I had to do. I didn't enjoy doing it, but I felt like it was incumbent on me as a patriot to stand up and speak my piece, if I thought people were getting the country into trouble. And I think in the same way, as a friend of revolutionaries, a guy like me has got to be able to say, "You have to be very careful about how you handle the qeustion of democracy. "

In my heart I don't really want to hold them responsible for that, because I say, how much can you make them responsible for ? And they don't -- the intellectuals who get thrown into jails are always the ones who write the songs and the sermons and the speeches, and so if you read the intellectuals and the theoreticians and the rest, you think that the revolution has something to do with civil rights, with freedom of political expression. It does, but it's trivial. What really makes the revolution happen is the deprivation of the masses of the people, which has no direct connection to the intellectual and moral

deprivation of the elite that cares about that. And I'm not being cynical about the morality of the masses when I say this. I think that the masses have other ways to express their morality than intellectuals do, and are not so troubled that the newspapers don't tell the truth. It doesn't mean that the people don't know the truth. I'm sure that in all of these highly repressive countries, there is a very elaborately worked out and highly protected grapevine which may be in its own way as responsive, as articulate, as informative, as educational, as ABC type, NBC type, CBS type , throw in NPR for good measure.

In other words, I am an intellectual and I care about freedom of expression and all these fine things, but I don't think it's correct to identify that particular kind of interest with the interest that makes the revolution happen.

I think that what makes a revolution happen is something much bigger and cruder than that. It's the humiliation of a people as a whole, and it culminates in an impulse of rejection and destruction, which , I think that's what I was trying to say in that chapter you referred to, "The Revolt " in CONTAINMENT AND CHANGE. I was trying to say that you can't hold it responsible to its theories. Its theories are produced by other people in different circumstances, and they don't have anything to do with what historically happens. What historically happens is a convusion of the population that compels, through the niggardliness, the greed, ths shortsightedness, the fear, the paranoia of the ruling group, the impotence of the ruling group maybe in some instances.

So the Cuban Revolution is made to feed the Cuban people, to clothe the Cuban people, to educate them, to give them dentistry and doctors, and to uphold their pride as a people so they can say, "We're not just under somebody's thumb, " which is very important.

Especially for a macho people like so many of the Latin countries.

So, since I myself have got it kind of cased, that the reason why the Cuban Revolution happened is that the empire oppressed them, oppressed the Cuban people physically, I still feel that they -- how am I going to come out of this ?

The revolution seems to be made for civil libertarian reasons, because it's intellectuals who write it up. But the reality underneath is that it's made for gutbucket reasons of human need. That is to say, the program of the Cuban Revolution was to feed the Cuban people. That's what the program of the Cuban Revolution was. Or you could even put it in a fancier way -- the program of the Cuban Revolution was to modernize the Cuban work force. Maybe that's an even better way to put it, to create a modern work force. That's what they're supposed to do.

They're not supposed to create a Bill of Rights Utopia. They only pretended that, to fake people out and to draw liberals in. And because that's what they really thought at the time, they believed at the time -- if only we have liberty, then everything will be all right.

Well, it turned out that liberty was a complex, multi-layered thing, and in any case, it didn't put the food on the table. What is that song or poem of Brecht's ? "First feed the face, then talk right and wrong. " I think that's pretty cynical, but I tell you, in the new realistic sense, I couldn't hold anybody responsible for standard of morality who was suffering from a hole in the stomach. I would feel like a fool. So since, you know, there I am in what I was saying before, since it's our country that creates the problems to begin with, that the Cubans have to solve, how can I hold the Cubans responsible for the whole agenda that even their idealists create ?

And yet if they don't, if they don't stay true to that,

in the end they just betray themselvs.

I go round and round on it. I can

Q: I can hear everybody, sort of chasing themselves around.

Oglesby: I chase myself round and round. I did then, and I do now. And in the end I remember --

Now I'll get back to my story and complete it, I hope. Turn that thing off for a while, because this really .....

....because it involves somebody else, a woman. You don't need to know who. It was a woman. One of the best and brightest women, on this trip, and we sort of fell into each other, and by the sixth or seventh day we're sleeping in the same bed. And one day we woke up , at the Havana Libre, sun streaming through these gauzy curtains-- you go open a curtain, look out. You're on the 15th floor or something. Down below you is old Havana. Out there is the harbor, and the sky is so blue and the ocean is so blue, and you say, "Hey, Cuban fling!"

And the irony of it sort of powers its way in, that you know, here you are in the Hilton, being treated very much like a privileged American tourist, in a Third World country where relationships are still a lot what they used to be. In any case, it seemed strange, and this whole issue about the homosexual kid, and the debate that had been going around about the fact that Padilla had had this book suppressed, just a little bit before --

Somehow it hit this lady and me at the same time, that something really -- we couldn't just come and watch this and go away. This was poweful. This Cuban experience was very powerful, in its contradictions as much as in its slogans . And how could we crack through the ignorance of Cuba that seems to obtain generally in the United States ?

And like I said, I'd been thinking too about the question of, what do we do next ? We couldn't intensify the struggle against the war without going deep into illegal action. There was just no place else to raise the stakes. You'd hit the limit on that, and the next thing you did was just going to punch through the wall.

And the same thing seemed true about civil rights -- they were into burning cities and talking about Black Power, which had made some sense as long as Martin Luther King was alive. It's like that old cartoon situation, where the little guy is trying to get at the brute but his buddy is holding him back -- "Hey, let me at him, I'll tear him limb from limb. "

Suddenly his buddy lets him go. That's how it was with the civil rights Black Power guys. As long as there was Martin Luther King standing between them and Whitey, they could talk about "getting Whitey" all they wanted, and they really wouldn't have to worry that much about Whitey taking them seriously. But once Martin was gone, there was nothing between them any more, and that's really when the cops started to come down heavy against the Panthers. It was after King was killed.

Q: Was it that King would have held the Black Power people back or held the military back ?

Oglesby: Well, King's ties to the liberals, the liberals ties to the system, would have inhibited the police, and similarly his ties to the kids, the Black Power kids, the youth. I mean, they would talk, it sounded contemptuously, of King, call him "De Lawd, " but I think there was as profound respect for him beneath that, and not very far beneath it, either, and certainly a great dependency, and when he was gone, boy, they were alone suddenly with this big bad mad hombre who

now didn't have any reason any more to hold back.

Q: King, by his broad appeal, if they had attacked the Panthers that heavily before, that he and the black community would have responded with some sense of outrage.

Oglesby: Yes. And not just the black community either. I mean, King by that time was a true national leader. He had a large white constituency. And his involvement was always trouble for the Fascists and neo-Fascists among us.

But anyway, because of these circumstances, it seemed there wasn't anything -- it was hard to figure out what you did next, about the war, about civil rights.

So standing there on this balcony in Cuba, it popped into my mind: gee, what we should do is focus on Cuba, because for one thing, Nixon is coming to power and Nixon has a big problem about Cuba, about Castro, and we probably ought to assume, on the basis of what we know about 1959, 1960, that Nixon is going to do something about Cuba. Who knows what that will be ? But this should be a time for us to talk about the Cubans.

So I thought, what if -- but the main, I guess I had this one thing, the main thing that hit you about Cuba at that point was the concentration of the Ten Million Tons of Sugar campaign. If they could get ten million tons of sugar out of their refineries and into boats, they could buy some busses from Britain and Czechoslovakia, and they wouldn't have to borrow money from the Russians to do it, so they were going to bank everything on getting ten million tons. They had the refining capacity, and they had plenty in terms of cane in the ground, but they did not have the capacity to harvest it,

and to get it to the refineries. The labor force just wasn't big enough.

So what they were going to do therefore was, in the cane harvesting season, which is a very long season, it's different from one end of the island to the other, "we're just going to have to empty our cities, " and this means people who had never looked at a machete , Cuban middle class people who grew up in the cities and just are not farmers and who cut their thumbs off like anybody else -- everyone --- because even if you only cut one stalk of sugar cane down, that is one stalk that otherwise we wouldn't have got. That's much closer to the ten million tons. So, everybody into the field, everybody's going to have to become a machete wielding agrarian proletarian.

Well, that struck me as kind of a, not only a major policy for Cuba, a major policy goal to get that ten million tons and that degree of economic freedom. It said a lot about where Cuba wanted to take its relationship with the Russians, and I really liked that. And there was also this special quality about an event which you have to do and you're not able to do or you don't know how to do yet.

There were other examples of that. We'd gone to some orchard where they'd tried to build a dam, but all the people who knew how to build dams had run over to Florida after the Revolution, so , they were bright people like you and me, but what if we had to build an irrigation dam across a little stream ten feet wide ? What the hell do you and I know about that ?

Well, we have our common sense, and we would scratch our heads and get some bags of cement and do it, and probably, like happened with them, the damn thing popped right in two. So then a little further downstream there was a second one, and it broke in a different way.

Finally the third one was working when we saw it.

Their toothpaste all got hard in the tube. Hey, who knows how to keep toothpaste soft in the tube ? I don't know anything about that. I'm a reasonably well educated man. I wouldn't have the foggiest notion.

The guy was in Florida who knew how to do it. Somebody had to figure it out. Somebody who didn't know how.

The people who had to cut sugarcane down didn't know how to do it. They were going to have to learn as they did it. Be a whole new things for them.

To me, that became the leading image of what the Revolution was about, was people confronting new challenges and having to come at them with whatever resources they had, but not the right tools, not the right time, not the right moment. Everything wrong. And yet you've got to rise to that.

Q: Situation where you do your utmost --

Oglesby: Yes. and I thought, Americans are against this Revolution because they see it in terms of annobels ? and you know, terrorism, military stuff. Maybe if Americans could get to see the Revolution is really an economic act of self-reorganization in a time of sustained and profound crisis, then they wouldn't feel like they do about it, and maybe that would make it harder for Nixon to get away with some kind of trash, some new Bay of Pigs operation.

And you could hear how the debate would go. You would hear people saying, "Oh no, what do we know about cutting sugar cane ? We'd get down there and we'd be more trouble than we'd be worth. "

Aha, not so, because of the situation on the ground. Everybody who could handle a machete could contribute something to the good, and that in fact was the very essence of the situation, that you would be

called to do something that you had never done before, organize yourself in a way that you had never thought of doing it before, because if you didn't, you couldn't achieve the objective that was essential.

So it would be good for us to go down to Cuba and experience some of that tension, because that is a highly educational situation. You learn vast in those circumstances.

Moreover, if we talk about the Cuban Revolution in these terms, then we talk to PTA groups. We talk to church groups, socials, we talk to Elks and Kiwanis, we talk to Rotarians and Boy Scouts. You know, we go after heartland America,around the proposition that they are letting their country do very cruel things , very cruel and unnecessary things to a group of people who never meant us any harm and were just trying to take care of problems that we put on them to begin with.

And I felt that if you could make that clear to American people in general, there was no way that they would let Nixon mess with Cuba.

So , I proposed this to Carlos Raphael Rodriguez, the president of Cuba. Because I was representing LIFE MAGAZINE, I had an afternoon with him alone, and I discussed this with him and the politics of it, and I proposed it. He said he would take it to Fidel.

I was leaving that day. It was sort of a dramatic moment -- I'm getting on the airplane, etc. I hear a siren in the distance. Here comes this motorcycle messenger, with a message that Castro approved it, the idea of a Venceremos Brigade from the United States, and that we would coordinate through the people at the Cuban embassy at the UN.

Well, so, I come back to the US with this proposal rattling in my brain. I had to go through Madrid. I'd been up for five days straight. I was about to fall out of my skin, and I'm trying to write

down this tstuff.

The situation back in the United States was very weird. PL at that time was making its all-out push to destroy SDS . And one of the ways that they'd done it, by infiltrating us, was to attack every position that we wanted to take by using a more Left wing kind of rhetoric. That is , you would get out of PL in those days a very Marxist-Leninist denunciation of Ho Chi Minh, or of Fidel Castro, and especially of Fidel Castro. PL really dumped on the Cuban Revolution every chance they got, just as though they were cops -- which I always have thought they were. Cops whose mission was to use the Left wing to destroy the Left wing.

If I had proposed the Venceremos Project to SDS, then it would be an SDS project. That right there would have ruined our organization because of the way PL would have reacted. They would have been obligated to condemn it, to fight against it, to try to sabotage it, and the difficulties that they could have created in a realistic sense for such a project would have doomed it to failure before you even got going.

So if there was going to be an SDS project, ther was no way to keep PL off its back. There probably wouldn't be anyway, but you wouldn't have a chance in hell if the program was surfaced through SDS.

So I didn't want it to be an SDS project, and I didn't think that anybody else within the decision-making group of SDS should want it to be an SDS project either.

So the next question was, how could I get a meeting with just the people in the NC who were not moles for PL ? As there was at least one mole for PL in our decision-making group.

This normally would have been hard, because everybody was scattered around the country, but under those conditions it was

almost impossible, with not being able to say straight out what you were talking about. Every phone was insecure. I couldn't just pick up a phone and say, "Hey, Bernardine, I think we ought to have this Venceremos thing. " I had to kind of keep it to myself and just talk about it with a very few select people and sort of gradually try to organize the larger group that would take the responsibility of making the decision to do this , that would organize to set it up and carry it out, and that would see to it that it had good politics, in the sense of reaching out to the right, to our right.

Well, I bargained on PL, but I didn't bargain on the extent to which Klonsky and I guess others had undermined me at the leadership level. It was so bad that when other people in the NC were finally drawn into this, it happened in Madison in a drugstore, in a little soda fountain in Madison, Wisconsin, when I first laid this out to Bernardine and to a couple of other people, and she was the key one --

Well, I couldn't understand why she didn't react real enthusiastically. To me, it was just a perfect way out of our hangup with Vietnam and with civil rights, not knowing , you know, what kind of national project to go to, and it was responsible , for us to talk about Cuba at that time, and there were just all kinds of reasons that made it really a sensible program. It was probably the best idea I ever had when I was in SDS.

I later found out the reason why she was so negative. It wasn't that she was negative to the idea, she right away realized that it was a powerful idea, but what she thought was that I had Fidel Castro in my back pocket, and was now going to use this enormous prestige and clout that this would confer upon me to organize a whole new thing, outside of SDS, that would be competitive with SCS, and would be

dominated by me and my mushy, moderate, reactionary, ultra-liberal politics. And she was kind of committed to this not happening. In her view, the thing should be, you don't send down PTA members to learn how to cut cane, you send down committed activists to learn how to make Molotov cocktails, to learn how to operate in an urban guerilla setting such as the Cubans had experienced.

Well, there was an argument which took place in many different places in the country over a period of months, probably more like weeks, though it seemed like a long time.

While everything else was falling apart for me -- my marriage was breaking up at this point, and San Francisco was super-weird. I cannot begin to explain how weird it was. It had some beautiful highs, amazingly glorious moments, but God, it was overall such a bummer!

Well, the long and the short of it , now, this is really the end, it came down to me. It came down to whether I was going to try to force my way and really go out and do it, and endure the enormous conflict and shoulder the incredible responsibility , and probably see the program destroyed, because it would have so many enemies right at the outset, so many enemies -- or, was I going to try to come to terms somehow with Bernardine and her group ? They were outwardly crazy, but still on an individual basis, they were still the sanest people around.

And that's what I decided to do. That was my mistake. If I had been a true soldier, a great emperor, I never would have gone for compromising the program just in order to get a quick leadership group setup. Because SDS could do that.I mean, it could happen pretty quick. If the NC made the decision, to get behind the project. As they did,

once it was decided that -- well, the compromise was, between my, PTA members to learn how to cut cane, and Bernardine's student activists to make Molotov cocktails, we agreed that he would be a student activist and he would learn how to cut cane. That was how the thing was resolved.

And in that respect, it worked pretty well. A lot of people went down. And I think it did have a beneficial impact on the country, although it was much smaller, because it was kept a kind of guarded and small program, compared to what I'd been thinking about. I'd been thinking in terms of a thousand people or two thousand. And I don't think it ever got up that high. In any case, it was practically 100 percent students, and it became a kind of a popularity contest thing, in which people would want to go to Cuba to cut cane, and so they would fund raise around it. That was a good part of it. It's good to have those kinds of focal things in a chapter's life, some project. And "We'll send some guy to Cuba. We'll buy a machete. "

So the project happened, and it was good. I think the Cubans liked it on the whole It was on the whole good here. I had an input, even though I was barred from the project, through the Cuban embassy. There was a period when I would have these clandestine meetings with a Cuban diplomat in a little Irish pub on Third Avenue, and he would show me the list that the Venceremos Committee had submitted, and he would say, "Which ones of these are crazy ? Which ones are probably cops ? "

So I had,nobody knows this, I had a review, for the first year of that program. And then it sort of settled down and there wasn't that much reason for it any more.

Q: One of the things that strikes me about that is the , in some ways, the parallel to , thinking about the experience you were talking about and the way that people would be put into that position of having to do one's utmost and confront in that way and learn about themselves and learn about that society -- that interplay between their personal transformation, as a part of an overall process, is something I'm really intrigued by. It seems to be sort of an ongoing thing in the history of SDS, taking different forms. And I think in the New Left as a whole. In some ways, there's a parallel to what Hayden was arguing in '65, I'd guess, that --

Oglesby: -- How so ?

Q: Well, it's sort of like --

Oglesby: -- think about it a second, I'll bring you a beer.....

Tape # 3, side 5 [sic]

Q:... what we were saying earlier, it just occurs to me, what we've been going around, the meaning of an Existential politics, which it seems to me is sort of what that is, is that need -- because you don't really know why you have that need to do it, but it has to do with who you are.

Oglesby: Who you want to be.

Q: Yes.

Oglesby: What you want to be.

Q: Yes.

Oglesby: You don't want to be the person who would miss the pass at

the goal line. And let the whole team down. And for this reason, you become the captain of the team. That's why some people are captains.

It's mysterious, though, isn't it, what it is that makes certain people step across the line ? And volunteer themselves for that.

Q: It seems to me it only appeals to certain kinds of people. There is a limit. And that is, deifferently, what you were talking about with the difference between intellectuals in the Third World and their conception of what the Revolution was about, and what actually powers those Revolutions. It seems to me there's a similar gap there.

Oglesby. The intellectual in the Third World wants his freedom of speech, in order to say that the masses are oppresssed. When the moement comes along that founds itself on that recognition, and drives the oppressor out of office, then in their eyes, the eyes of the new holders of power, the basic truth which freedom of speech was necessary in order to express before has now become the whole canopy of government itself, so what need do we have for further niggling carping criticism from the pissant intellectuals with their soft hands ?

That seems to be how it works. And the intellectuals have got to deal with it. They know that they're absolutely essential for the Revolution, at a certain stage in its growth. And they know that if they're defeated by it, then the Revolution as a whole is somehow the loser. And yet, the soldiers who take power have such an imperious manner and the people don't challenge them but rather identify with them, and the poets they love the best are always the ones who died in the battle, like there are a couple of poets down in Cuba , with Padilla, who had been killed in the Revolution, brothers, and

when the Padilla case was being debated, the response that the Cubans would make was that their favorite poets were killed in the Revolution. It's a way to cut the conversation short. Cruel and stupid and empty, but you can see what it comes from. It's so easy to see what it comes from.

And the leadership of the intellectuals has to reckon with the appalling fact that this phenomenon is apparent. It it were something that remained hidden from you, it would almost be better. You might just blunder your way through. You might be lucky. But as it is,when you try to bring it into focus -- when you see it, you have to try to bring it in focus, and that lends a sort of ambiguous or ambivalent quality to your political writing. You now longer see things so blackly and whitely --which is good for your mortal soul, but it's not good for your service to the Revolution, which wants to win battles. Right ?

Q: Was this on your mind then when you were proposing the Venceremos project, some of this understand of black and white, this ambiguity stuff ?

Oglesby: Yes. I wrote some of it down. It's in the-- before I went to Cuba. Before Cuba it was in, when I was in Antioch. While I was at Antioch I did this book, THE NEW LEFT READER, and there's, the introductory chapter, my chapter to the thing, is something called "The Idea of New Left. " And I believe I tried to work out there the idea of a politics not fixed on end points but on process, like on the question of Socialism, I think I tried to make the point that whereas the traditional Left is Socialist, the New Left is un-Socialist, not anti-Socialist, not even non-Socialist, but un-Socialist, meaning that in theory it is indifferent to the consequences of

popular decision-making , supporting whatever decision is made by the fully engaged population, the citizenry. And that's sort of the difference from the Old Left, that he New Left was not aiming its politics at an end point. We no longer believed in the necessity or the efficacy of Socialism or even really in its moral superiority. We had the Russians to look at. We were taking the position thatwwhatever ecoonomic system developed, it should be the result of a choice made openly and continually re-examined by a fully informed, unintimidated population . That was the politics of the American New Left.

Whereas in Europe, the New Left, the politics of the New Left was the politics of not being Communist and yet being pro-revolutionary.

Q: Which is similar in its rejection. I mean, you're rejecting that goal in some sense, they're rejecting that vehicle.

Oglesby: Right. There's a real parallel. But it is two lines parallel and not running in the same channel.

Q: Which of those pieces that you put in that READER did you agree with most, do you remmber ?

Oglesby: Hm. I'd have to look at a table of contents. You got a minute ?

Q: Sure. Think about who was in there who was American, who might represent what you were trying, -- besides the Europeans --

Oglesxy: This guy Kolakowski, I remember thinking he was pretty heavy duty. Well, C. Wright Mills is a beautiful dude. I'm sure that I would have great joy in re-reading whatever he says, but to tell the truth I don't remember what he says.

He's trying to say that the intellectuals are responsible. Get past liberalism.

Marcuse -- I don't know what to say about ~~Zmacuse~~ Marcuse now. I think that this whole business of culture criticism is highly dubious , if carried out in a political manner or in a political arena or with some thought of having a direct political result. Great example is the way Pat Cadell convinced Jimmy Carter that Americans were feeling a malaise, and some speech writer had the bright idea of sticking that in a speech. I mean, whether it's true, in whatever sense a thing like that could or could not be true, whether it's true or not, it's almost beside the point. You know, forget it. You can talk about that stuff sitting around the fireside late at night, with a few intimate friends and the family preacher over a dram of benedictine, but not as a major public statement of the President of a superpower. I mean, what is this shit ? "Malaise ?" Give me a break, take a vacation, OK, if you feel bad, Jimmy , if you're not getting laid -- what is it ? But go feel good, don't give me your depression.

Q: You compare it to Marcuse ?

Oglesby: Marcuse's preoccupation with the failures of society to satisfy his essentially esthetic demand makes great reading, because he's sensitive and bright and thinks of great novel new ways to look at things, terrific. All kinds of applause. But as politics, it doesn't lead anybody anywhere, except maybe, as with the hippies, into a kind of oblivion. Marcuse was the political philosopher of the hippies. Nobody read Marcuse and joined SDS. We read Marcuse after we were in, because we discovered the dialogue, and especially because the Europeans

were kind of interested in him. Marcuse, you know, sort of stood for this whole European culture critic --

Q: Were they more interested in him ? Because, the events, that's something you found, that they were --

Oglesby: Isn't that true ? Isn't Marcuse a philosopher of the Adorno school ? That whole group, Lectime ? Bruno Bettelheim

Q: Yes, sure, Marcuse was very popular among the French.

Oglesby: Well, he was popular among all kinds of New Leftists. You could say that, that he was a distinctively New Left philosopher, in both senses of New Left that I tried to describe before, the sense in which in Europe you're rejecting Communism, and in the United States, you're not playing for end points,you're playing for processes.

He spoke to both of those concerns, the need to go beyond Politburo rhetoric as a means of describing contemporary life, and the need to humanize political action, to de-absolutize politics, to centralize politics, in other words. I mean, de-absolutizing is just another way of saying depolarizing.

I would never have said anything like this at the time, but I think it's the theme in all this stuff. I think the way I'm thinking these days, that everything I wrote in that period , pretty much, exception some of the stuff that's explicitly focussed on Vietnam, everything that is political is aiming at the center, and is trying to resuscitate the idea of an activist centered radical politics, that isn't afraid to be a little bit Left wing and a little bit Right wing, in one and the same breath, because that's the way to a kind of a

balance. So, anyway, I think these pieces kind of reflect that, the things I was interested in.

Althussir's critique of Marx, his preferance for Hegel -- this too is in this culture critic strain, which is pretty alien to American political thought. But the general point is a New Left point, is an overthrowing Marx, or a re-interpretation of Marx, taking Marx beyond Marxism. Which is probably the best thing to do. Then thesis is that Marx is not a Marxist.

Oh, this thing of Marty's (Marty Nichlaus), the "Unknown Marx, " this is great. I mean, within the field of Marxism, this is a terrific thing, this review of the GRUNDISSE, and this laying out of a whole different way of looking at Marx, basically my way, I mean, for want of a better way to express that. Marx just as a philosopher more interested in process, and less interested in the end point.

The Marx that drives me crazy is the one that talks about -- the polemical Marxist, "We're living in pre-history. Mankind hasn't even begun yet. After the Revolution, then history will begin. "

Bullshit! Get lost !

No ,Marty's piece is great. Oh, "The May DayManifesto " -- this is terrific. This is a great piece of writing. This is a pretty good anthology actually, at least so far, these things.

"The May Day Manifesto, " it was the founding document of the British New Left, which lies somewhere between the French and the American , if you can imagine. Well, they were more , how to say it ? They were more conventionally political than we were, more clear about being Socialists and based on, you know, the trade union movement, but they were less worried about the state of modern culture than

the French tended to be. The Brits could live with anything, even an industrial city. They'd plant a little garden in the front yard and keep their little picket fence painted white, and be just as happy as bugs in a rug. You don't have to have the Rocky Mountains here and the pure lakes of Yosemite there. Who needs unpolluted nature ?

Kolakowski, that's a good piece.

Q: Did you have much contact with the German SDS ?

Oglesby: Once, a little, with , whatwwas it ? Something with Deutschke before he got shot. Was it in Europe ? See, sometimes my memory gets clogged up. I'll hae to figure that out.

Q: Was he at the War Crimes Tribunal ?

Oglesby: No, it wasn't. No, it couldn't have been. I never met Deutschke, but I had communication with him. Maybe I'd just better leave that.

Q: OK. I was just curious. Thinking about the differences myself -- and the Italians being more and more interesting to me.

Oglesby: Yeah, they're pretty good. Who did I know there ? I've spent more time in Italy almost -- well, I spent a good time in Britain, I mean several weeks, touring around, giving a lot of talks. And I did the same thing in Italy. In France, though, I just hung out with these sort of neo-Trotskyists, literaryyy types. That was fun, though. I lectured at Shakespeare and company. I felt so proud . And then, I think that probably the high point of European interaction was those two sessions of the Russell Tribunal.

Q: You were going to tell me about that before,you started to tell me.

Oglesby: I know I got real mad at that Yugoslav hero, what the hell's his name ? I won't be able to remember his name now.

Vladamir -- gee, I'm sorry. Vladamir.

Q: Not Djilas ?

Oglesby : No. No. But a very heavy duty guy, close to Tito, a big gorilla. He had a steel plate in his head from some combat injury.

Once he was calling roll, we were all sitting there, as judges of this big tribunal, on a stage, and -- oh, you were just supposed to give your name and your country. and it came to me and I said, "Carl Oglesby, American. "

And he stopped, and he said, "You're not from America! " He said, "You're from the United States. There are other people who are from America, Cubans. "

And I knew that he was technically right, but I didn't like being rebuked , and besides, I thought that for me to call myself an American said something about my attitude towards life in the hemisphere, and if this Indo-European creep was incapable of grasping that nuance, he could at least keep his trap shut.

I didn't say anything. I just let the next guy pick it up and say who he was and what country he was from. It was one of the SNCC guys, I think, so I had a little help.

Q: Waht did he say ?

Oglesby: Oh, he just said, "Cortland Cox, sitting in for Stokely Carmichael from SNCC. "United States, " I guess he said.

But I had a real backstage encounter with Vladamir about that. Yes. I took him aside and I basically said, "Look, jerk, never put me in that situation again, or I'll have to put another plate

in that head of yours. "

I was very angry about that. That was the low moment of my experience with that thing.

The high moment was watching Jean Paul Sartre write that opinion of his on genocide, on the genocide question. I always thought that I was a compulsive writer. He is terrible. He writes everything out longhand, and if he gets to the bottom of the page and he makes a mistake, he must recopy the whole page. Each page has to be , no changes. And gradually as he works, the crumpled papers at his feet form a higher and higher pile.

And this thing on genocide gave him a lot of trouble, apparently, and he was kind of - - he was writing it in public as we were meeting. We were in one little room and through an open door you could see him standing at this stand-up desk, scribbling, crumpling, scribbling.

Q: And what was the process, the event ? What happened ?

Oglesby: Well, there were several committees, mainly French but also significantly Swedish, which had been organized before the whole thing got going to collect evidence, and -- well, there was a legal committee which kind of defined the issues that the Tribunal would look at. Was genocide being committed? for example. That was one of a half dozen particular questions that were lined up by the lawyers. And then, committees were organized to get evidence against the US in each of these areas. The process of the thing was, you sat there like a judge on a bench listening to a succession of lawyers present a succession of witnesses, Vietnamese people, for example, or physical evidence, the bloba ? bombs, the anti-personnel bombs, the phosphorus bombs. Once there was a Vietnamese victim of a phosphor bomb,

and we saw the -- and smelled the wound -- still burning. You can't get it out. They were going to do something for him at a Swedish hospital. A phosphor pellet had penetrated the flesh of his calf. I guess up to the bone or maybe a little bit into the bone. And it was burning the bone, and burning, it had been burning for two or three weeks, you know. It just never goes out, and for some reason, it's very hard to take it out, maybe because it was embedded in the bone and the Vietnamese didn't have that kind of facility. Anyway we saw a lot of that.

It was interesting, learning -- the whole question about genocide came down to , you know, what was the war like ? And it turned out that all the evidence that suggested genocide on the part of the United States was merely so much explanation of the fact that you had an army here, you had a population there, and the army was trying to get the population to do something that the population damn well didn't want to do, and yet the population didn't have the ability to form up into straight ahead military squadrons, because the oppression was so intense that it could not do that, and yet the population wouldn't give up, and therefore the military found itself seeking targets ever more widely dispersed in the population, and finally becoming the population itself , as though that really were the beast that was attacking you, and it was somehow beside the point to go after a general here or aplatoon of regulars some place else. If you wanted to win the war in Vietnam, then you had to make the people of Vietnam feel pain. So therfore you bombed the leprosarium and you strafed the -- in such a way as to appear to be driving the lepers back into the population. Therefore you bombed the clearly marked hospital. Therefore you bombed the Catholic cathedrals in particular, because

your sociologists had told you that the Catholics were the ones in the North who were least closely associated with the Buddhist-dominated Viet Minh government, and therefor the Catholics were the ones who could be most quickly broken off, so you bombed their churches to destroy their confidence in the government's ability to protect them. Basic principle of the terrorist, which was not defined as terrorism as such, but it's there in the American behavior.

We went after populatioin targets, churches, schools, hospitals, because there were no ammo dumps, and because the Ho Chi Minh Trail was the people of Vietnam as a whole . Not just a bunch of trucks and some highways.

Q: This is the kind of analysis and argument that they were putting forward to you in this event, this was the evidence they were putting forward ?

Oglesby: Yes,anddyou spent a couple of weeks in each session listening to the stuff, before an audience, and sometimes asking a question, and then , at the end of it all, the audience went homeand the witnesses went home. The committee people sort of hung around. There was a scene, to imagine, in Stockholm, all the peaceniks in Stockholm were out, and you deliberated all night tempestuously over the least comma in the final judgment, and with those nights where it was daylight all night. There would be like a minute of night at 3:30 AM. And you had that sense thatthey never shut down, it was just 24 hours debate, some of it very interesting, much of it absolute terrible palavering.

Russell was not there because he was sick. So he was represented by this improbable and very menacing looking American named Ralph Schoenman, you've surely run across his name ?

Q: Yes, but I don't know who he was.

Oglesby: Well, nobody knows who Ralph Schoenman was. But at that time, he was , he had become a personal secretary for political matters to Lord Russell, who was still more or less mentally agile, but was infirm and basically living on four double scotches a day. He was in no shape to come to Stockholm, so he sent Schoenman as a sort of a deputy . Well, Jean Paul Sartre was the big guy on the scene, and it was called the Jean Paul Sartre -- Bertrand Russell International War Crimes Tribunal

Schoenman, however, as the deputy of Lord Russell, fancied that he had bigger britches and dared to confront Sartre. Schoenman was a most un-American looking guy. He had a shock of dark hair which sort of fell over his face, a very pale skin, and a very black beard which he wore without the moustache, just along the chin line, almost a sort of archaic look to him. He was somewhere between 25 and 28, 29, I would think, at that time, and was just the most jeering kind of debater you can imagine, constantly drenching his victims in sarcasm, a little clumsy about it . He wasn't lighthanded. He didn't make you feel joy in his vituperations. They were just heavy and clumsy, and he continually insisted that he had, as Russell's deputy, a priority of place equal to Sastre's .

There were a lot of sort of prestigious people in that thing. Simone de Beauvoir, for one.

Q: Was she there ? Who else ?

Oglesby: Yes. Peter Weiss, the playwright from and Isaac Deutscher. Gee, who am I forgetting ? There was an important Swedish novelist named Sara Leidman.

Dave Dellinger from the US, plus Stokely Carmichael and me, and because Stokely was off making revolution in the Horn of Africa, he was sat in for by three guys from SNCC, Cortland Cox and Julius Lester, gee, who was the other guy ?

I can't think of other members of it, but there were maybe half a dozen more.

Q: What was the interaction between those guys? Did people get along ? Did they agree in general or was their disagreement ?

Oglesby: The only real disagreement was over the genocide question. The other propositions were of the order, Is the United States intervention in Vietnam legal ? It didn't stand a real chance of being declared legal. The arguments were the familiar ones from that time. There was a list of four or five of these, and then ..... here's another bottle....then we got down to the gutbucket one, the wrenching question, which is whether we were going to be willing to say the United States was committing genocide?

The other votes were I think all unanimous. Now it was 9 to 2, and I was one of the 2. I didn't think the case had been shown, and -- although I thought that Sartre's statement about it was brilliant.

Q: There are a lot of long term questions I'll give up for now, because I don't think they would be real long conversations.

Oglesby: Such as ?

Q: Well, one thing is, when we're talking about Hayden and '65 and that moment, the debate is about what should be done and whether the war should be a priority or ERAP, and you're arguing

for the war, and he's arguing that students are no good. Are you at that point also in favor of-- what made you think that the students, that the campus is the place to be organizing ?

Oglesby: The teach-in. It was the actual experience of the teach-in, which was like a transfigured night. You know that well. But up until the teach-in, I was going to go to Boston and be a community organizer like the rest of the power elite in SDS, because the doors were open to me right away. Right away I was organized by Paul Potter, by Tom Hayden, by Al Haber, by Dick Flacks, and I was still, I mean, I was very dumb all through the experience. I was constantly learning what had happened to me after it was already over. It really makes you humble , to go through a thing like that. You think you're so damned smart, and then you get out there in actual action and see how long it takes to figure this stuff out.

So you know, I'm not that proud of my record in that respect, in terms of quick thinking.

Q: They're sort of pushing you towards ERAP.

Oglesby: And then the teach-in came. Which was a total .....(....)

I hate to admit it, but it's alluring to me. I have the sense that my utterances are about to be carved ingranite for the ages.

Q: Much as the , you know, people at Columbia (crosstalk)
That's what I mean, boy, it just sits on that granite up there.

Oglesby: So I was going to go to Boston, and then, I think it's interesting that it was Boston, by the way. That was the one city that would have been right. Somebody gets here. And then the damned teach-in happened, and to see the way kids turned on and lit up and

glowed with the hunger for knowledge was a transforming experience. It brought out all the teacher in me, for maybe the first time. For the first time in my life, I felt like I had something to teach that people wanted to learn, and the interaction between teacher, learner, and then you become the learner and they become the teacher -- that is just the most gratifying intellectual experience there is for me. The interchange is actually taking place. There's some real thinking, some real reception, some real understanding. And the sense of the presence of that spirit, in the teach-in, was so strong that it ended any thought I had of going into poverty stuff. I wanted to talk to campus people, students and faculty people, about the war and I didn't want to go organize some poor jerk to get a Stop sign on the street where their kid had just been run over. Sorry.

I wanted that kind of work to happen, but I didn't want to do it. I wanted to get involved through my strength, or what I thought was my strength.

So that's what happened, as a result of the teach-in thing. I said, I'm not going to Boston, I'm going to spend my time organizing around the war.

Q: If Hayden's strategy was to , as you were talking about, building this grass roots movement to be eventually the Left wing of the Democratic Party, from the poor, that was his strategy, what was your alternative strategy about how to end the war ?

Oglesby: Well, in the first place, it was not a strategy to end the war, because one of the things you abandon right away is that you had begun to act in time to stop this war, and our slogan became, "We're stopping the seventh war from now, " and that might add up to

being the war down in Nicaragua, as the war that the anti-Vietnam War movement was actually stopping -- the war that is not taking place today in Central America is the war that we stopped.

Although I think it really turned out that we did stop the War in Vietnam, or we precipitated the conditions in which it was no longer possible for Nixon or anyone else to wage the War in Vietnam.

I think that we precipitated Watergate. If it hadn't been for Nixon's grotesque fear of the movement --- well, I take that back. It wasn't a grotesque fear, it was a calculated political diplomatic fear of the effect that the movement created in the minds of Vietnam negotiators. Nixon thought that if it wasn't for the anti-war movement, the North Vietnamese would give up. So every little evidence that the anti-war movement existed and was growing, to him, was terrible, because it only made him half to fight harder, bomb them the more, threaten them with nuclear weapons, in order to get an"honorable " resolution.

And that's why Nixon decided that the movement had to be destroyed, and sent Helms to do it, and Helms came back and said that the movement is legal, and that's why Nixon set up his own independent intelligence group, because (Richard) Helms wouldn't cooperate with his, Nixon's, need to destroy the anti-war movement.

Why Helms stood fast, that's another question. I think it's a very interesting question, why Helms as a good guy. He was a terrific guy. He was like a rock. He wouldn't let these guys, first Johnson and then Nixon, he wouldn't let them get away with saying that the anti-war movement was the creature of Soviet power, but steadfastly fought against that. And it was because of this that Nixon , at his wits' end, said basically, "Well, screw it, Helms, if you can't find evidence linking these people to Moscow, I can. " Right ? And he could. He

was right. He could. It would have stood up. It wouldn't have been true, but he could have said, "Look, here's Tom Hayden in Hanoi. Here's Bernardine Dohrn in Brataslava. Here's Oglesby in Havana.

And on and on in that vein, because we were bopping around the world, excited to be involved on the world stage. And there's no question about it, there were a lot of contacts with Communist officials.

Q: Would you say that you were more oriented toward the Third World or the European student leftists ? I mean, who ?

Oglesby: We saw ourselves on the cutting edge. So we didn't relate to the Europeans until ..... (off tape)

Tape # 3, side 6 (sic)

... main image in the Third World --

Oglesby: Yes, the concept of the Third World was even applied here. Students were Third World. Blacks certainly were Third World. Women for a while tried that metaphor, that they were Third World. It was anybody who was left out, anybody who was not yet a part of the march towards industrial progress.

I think Europe didn't really ever materialize to the New Left, and the problem of the Cold War never became a focus , an explicit problem. SDS had nothing to do with disarmament. Would never have proposed that as a strategic goal. I don't think. Maybe they would have. Certainly not while it existed. SDS said almost nothing about the Cold War. All it ever said or did was to take the red-baiting clause out of its charter.

Q: Your own stuff says, in some ways it's an explanation for this, that the real drama at that point, in terms of the Cold War , using Vietnam, and that that's what , you know, the tension was drawn and it's not surprising, but it's funny because the Europeans, they think of, I've seen some European interviews and in the process of talking with Europeans, they really think of the Americans as the model for their movement in some ways. They talk about the importance, put it this way, they talk about the importance of the relationship, that this is a very strong important relationship.

Oglesby: I think symbolically certainly that was true. I wasn't aware of that much actual interchange. I can't think, was there a meeting ever where SDS and German SDS and French guys and Italians all got together. I don't think there was ever anything at all like that. Something at Brataslava, but that was different. That was one of these international Communist get-togethers, and some of our folks showed up out of curiousity more than anything else.

Well, also, it was to meet with the North Vietnamese and the Viet Cong, with the National Liberation Front people -- Madame Binh. I think that's where Bernardine met Madame Binh, was in Brataslava. But that was different, and it was related directly to the war.

I think there was never sufficient attention in SDS to the virtues of more international ties. People didn't seem to be very interested in it.

But like I said, I think it was because we all felt we were on the cutting edge, and I'm interested to hear the European reaction. I think it might be, they believed the same, that to the extent that there was a white movement in the United States, it was because

there was a black movement first, and to the extent that it was an anti-war movement in the United States, it was because there was a Vietnamese resistance, and to the extent that there was overall in Europe a response against the Cold War, against Cold War concepts of Vietnam, pro-Third World --

They had Algeria smoking in the background, in France. But it was largely because of what was happening in America, that made it possible and sensible for them to put up that struggle. It made their struggle more powerful. It gave events in Europe a new dimension, that there was the movement in the United States. So I think it's true, that we broke open a situation that had been pretty well closed up for the Europeans. We showed a way through an impasse, at least an impasse of spirit, of culture, of expression, and we were able to do it as white students or as white middle class activists because the blacks had moved right in front of us.

People ask now, where is the movement ? We before said, well, the movement is right there, look. But if you're talking in terms of a tumultuous thing in the streets, the question then is, where are the blacks ? When black people figure out a way to move, white people will. But I don't think that these relationships can be reversed. If it hadn't been for the thing in America, I don't think something else could have created the necessary conditions for the thing in Europe. If it hadn't been for black people, I don't think there's anything else that could have exploded white people loose, not even the war.If the war had happened in a civil rights vacuum, its impact on the society wouldn't have been half what it was. It was that senectity? or whatever you call it, lining up of forces, that made everything suddenly accelerate, which was what the sixties really are all about.

It's that, from a personal standpoint, that sense everyone had of a sudden acceleration of possibility. Things that hadn't been thinkable before , in school, in personal life, in international politics, were suddenly practical projects, or at least you could make yourself think that.

Q: I think it's remarkable what belief in self does. If you have that belief, that's such a powerful force. You know, it's just like what I was saying about my father, where here he was caught in this thing, and when he finally sees it's possible to change his situation for the first time it's like "Oh, of course." I see a lot of people like that. "Things are shitty, but what can you do ? " That's the line -- "What can you do ? " And what happened, it seems to me, you got on the one hand Kennedy encouraging people to think that they can do something about it, "What can you do for your country ? " And on the other hand, you've got the civil rights movement showing, "Lookit, these people are doing something. These are the people who are in the worst place in society, absolute worst, and they're doing it, and they're doing it in a way that makes them beautiful. "

Oglesby: I think you've put your finger on it, on the whole pulse of the relationship between Kennedy and the movement, in that quote. I never realized it before, but that really was how we all took it. I've seen that line cited now by people trying to show Kennedy was a Fascist. But that's not how we felt. We felt that it was an invitation to come on in to the house of government. "Come on in, help us run this damn thing. " And we said, "Hey, all right. What can I do for my country ? I can fight racism. I can fight against the Vietnam War. "

"Take that -- Mother -- " That's it. That whole invitation to act that we associate with Kennedy, that's the most important thing that he did. That goes beyond any particular policy failures or successes.

Q: That's his mythic quality, as much as his reality, there, that comes into play, it seems to me. And it seems to me that is, replay that relationship as you say between the black movement and the white movement in this context here is replayed in a different context in Europe. It goes back, sort of this whole cascading type thing. When you talk about the acceleration of the sense of the possible, a very powerful image -- Look at a map of what was going on in 1968, and you sort of draw it out over time. You have that type of feeling, it seems like.

Oglesby: And it goes out of control, in the same way that that gesture expresses. Up to a certain point, it's a feeling of exhilaration, excitement, freedom. After a while, it turns into a longing for limits, a nostalgia for the center. This is also healthy. Politics probably has to pulse, since everything else pulses, you know, nothing else is just steady state expansion, so why shouldn't politics go in and out, up and down ? And freedom , sure, at a certain point is scary, and thanks, you don't want any more, let's put some controls on what could happen the very next moment. Whereas the previous year, you'd said, "Wow, what happens if we can take all the limits off? Take this thing to the max ? " It's scary.

Q: Yeah, that's what's so sudden in like '70, '71.

Oglesby: A sudden screeching madness. Bombs going off. Innocent

people dying everywhere. Yes. People bringing it on themselves. A lot of it -- I don't mean the Kent State kids or even the Weathermen. But there was one guy who was my favorite "Black Beast " from the movement, a film maker named Robert Kramer who made a film called "Ice, " a feature length film which showed to good reviews and a real response in Paris. At one point it was playing at two or three different theatres in Paris, long lines at each one to get into it. It was an attempt to visualize an urban revolution in a big modern city, what it would look and feel like if you really got down to the nitty gritty. It was a very brutal menacing kind of film, heavy, heavy on weapons, bad physical things happening to people.

Well, Kramer came up to stay at this farm house that I had repaired to up in Putney, Vermont, after the crashing down in San Francisco, and Kramer hadn't been living there very long before he started preaching the idea that we should ourselves acquire a proficiency in weapons, and no matter what anybody else said to him, like me, he on his own hook somewhere acquired a fistful of weapons, an over and under shotgun, couple of handguns, deer rifle -- got ammunition for them got over two hills from the farm house and set up a little gunnery range, and got everybody into feeling that they had to go over there and learn how to shoot a gun, because if you really not are willing to pick up a gun -- that was the slogan of the day -- if you weren't ready to pick up the gun, then you aren't serious, and you might as well just go back home.

You can imagine how I felt about this. I wound up leaving the place, because I couldn't get anybody to see it my way. Everybody else thought it was pretty good that Robert had brought these rifles up there and that they were now taking shooting practice.

The winter before I left, towns people had come by to plow John's driveway out. The next winter, the same people drove by and put pot shots through his window. And a little bit later, that spring, confonted a Peace Garden that the kids were trying to grow at Windham College there. There had been the bombing of Cambodia, the Christmas bombing. Kids said, "What do we do ? " and debated and debated. Came spring, they said, "We'll make a garden in memory, somehow. "

The town guys, the ones who had plowed the driveway and put pot shots through the window in successive winters, confronted these kids, in an armed posse-like showing of force, and totally destroyed that garden. I mean, brought a tractor or bulldozer in there and just squashed all their tomatoes and squashes , just for pure anger, that traced back to Robert Kramer's little adventure in weaponry, at that farm-- which otherwise had lived on such good terms with the local Vermont people.

Q: Where were you when Kent State happened ? '70 ?

Oglesby: There. That was the time I was there, the winter of '69, '70. And then in early , well, spring of '71-- no, it was before that. It was before that I came to Boston to see a play of mine done, and I met people here. You know, from hanging around the production. And I was looking for a way to get away from this madman. And besides, Putney's all right, but you've seen one Vermont winter, you've seen them all.

Q: I'm thinking about what you said before, about that pulsation. It's true. Very basic. I guess what I'm thinking about is, how would

you understand... I'm kind of stuck by trying to think about one point, how to understand what this means in history, this extraordinary burst of activity, connected in some very interesting ways, happening around the globe, with some certain differences but also some very basic resonances, and then it fades away, and it seems to me for very complex reasons, very complex reasons. I'm stuck with, how do you understand what that means in history ? How do we describe that in terms of 20th century ?

Oglesby: I know. Well, you're not given to know that. I hope I'm not the first to say it. You're not cleared for that at all!

I mean, what do you do, what could you do, if you discovered the laws of motion in history ? Which is something that people keep trying to do. It's a bizarre question, because history is our life, and we don't normally think of ourselves as subject matter for experiments, yet in every properly scientific discipline, where one in complete innocence pursues the laws of motion of whatever the subject is, in every other area, you can and must and are expected to do physical experimentation, if for no other reason than to prove that you know what you're talking about when you say, X is the law of the subject. X is the law of physics --- OK, let's see, show me. And that's where all the interesting science arises.

So what happens when somebody says , X is the law of human history, the law of the history of culture, or here are the principles by which culture evolves ?

Suppose you could wrap everything up into a manageable number of propositions, and suppose you could find the mathematics for tying them together and computerizing the data? What would you do ?

If you came to understand the laws of motion of political societies ? Would you intervene in the processes ? Would you conduct experiments just to see if you were right or not ?

What do we think of a scientist who pursues some particular result in his science? We think he's mad, fanatical, not scientific. We take his license away.

But what do we say of someone operating in the social sphere who lacks a goal, who lacks a purpose, who lacks a sense of values and judgment going beyond the mathematical ? We say they're deranged, they're only half human, they're automatons.

I think the whole question of understanding society, as a basis foraacting in it, is a real complicated . What is the purpose of social knowledge ? Is the purpose of social knowledge like the purpose that we attribute to physical knowledge of the physical universe ? Power over it, the ability to exploit it. Do we intend to play God about our own culture ? I guess we should. I mean, if we don't, who will ?

That's sort of what it means to become a moral force anyway, to presume to play God. And yet, we are so caught up in this dialetic of limits that when we do presume to play God,we always create great tragedy and chaos.

So it's as if the old basic conundrum of the sage on the mountain top returns, like a shaggy dog story that never has a proper end. You know, the guy climbs the mountain, "What is the meaning of life ? " "The meaning of life is that life has no meaning. " "What ? Did I climb this damn mountain for that ?"

And yet it seems ever the rule, that people who try to give life a meaning are on the threshhold of tyranny.

And it's that struggle against absolutism, within the body of commitment, within the context of passion for justice, it's within that contradiction -- it's not entirely a contradiction. It's a revolving, sometimes reciprocating relationship, sometimes self-cancelling relationship, but always complex, many -vectored, changing. You catch it in one mode, it's in the process of changing into something else.

And it's like a kaleidoscope. You know everything that's in there, all the little bits of glass that change, and you know how the mirrors are set up to make the designs, but you can never predict the next thing you're going to get. It never fools you when it happens. Union Carbide blows off 2000 people in Bohpal.Nobody is really surprised. We've all beenwaiting for this. But nobody could have predicted that it was now going to happen, that it would be there, and just that many people would be hurt. And it would be that company.

I don't know -- it's as if the laws of, understanding the laws of social motion is an understanding that only takes place at the rear of the train looking back down the tracks. And you never know, no matter how deep your understanding of the past becomes. You can name every tie in that railroad from here back to Chicago. You still don't know that the bridge is out 200 yards in front of you. You never know that. There is no way ever to do that.

And the past, the variations, the variances of the past, if anything, are tribute to the creativity of the future. You just know that no matter how logical the next thing that happens will be,it will at the same time be totally a surprise. Like Bohpal. You wake up one morning and 2000 people are dead. How many cows ? How many

goats and pigs and horses ?

And yet, it's so logical, and so easy to explain. And then look back in the records, and sure, you'll find two or three jokers back in 1982 saying, "They're not maintaining that system, it's going to cause a problem. "

Q: It's been said for a while as a general proposition.

Oglesby: Yes. And it reflects the whole difference of attitudes in the Third World. I mean, it's significant that it happened in Bohpal and not in West Virginia.

Q: It reflects a kind of changing in the world's historical context, as to where those kinds of things are going to take place. What's the edge as that industrial system continues to grow and expand. You know, it seems like as that grows and expands, it's just like ferment around the edges. That's one of the dominant themes of world history the last 100 years, and what's unusual in some ways about the sixties, is that it's not at that moment of industrialization. It's quite a bit after. And that there are these two groups set in motion at that time is very unusual, in some ways, fairly unprecedented in world history -- since there's no other country that was so far advanced, and so much the center of a world culture, a developing world culture. That's one of the things that's really striking to me, more so talking to kids from Europe that I've met, is , these kids know American sixties culture. Not kids, I'm talking about people my age, maybe a little older. These people who were maybe 18 in 1969 and they know about the Beatles, they know about Dylan, they know about this and that. They totally walk into that, they buy into

that, real strong, that this was a great culture. And that this was something that happened that they were very interested in. You know, it's through a megaphone, it seems to me, in some ways.

Oglesby: And yet American culture of that period is so British. If only because of the impact of the Beatles. That was a major impact. The whole culture hit us, and nobody ever thought the Brits had that in dem, I think. We thought that they were pretty square, and then suddenly they produced the Beatles. It turns out, hey, they're hip! That was a big eye opener, for American culture to adopt an idol from outside it. And yet their music was all based on American music.

Q: That feedback, yes. In some ways, that -- it seems like what happens is, all the things happening in the world are sort of feeding back off each other -- you know, revolutions in Africa, the black civil rights movement, the war, insurgence in Vietnam.

Oglesby: And going in and out of harmony or resonance. In and out of, what do you call it when they contradict and fight ? And then they get in the groove again and they pulse together and things shoot forward, and then, they fight. So it goes.

Jesus, you can never tell what-- Klonsky railing away at me, "I thought we had already established a scientific method of knowing about society and what should be done. " You know. Correct-- you can have a correct line, there is a correct line -- like, it made me think of somebody trying to bobsled down a hill, there was a line that you had to find through the curves. Only Klonsky had anything so rich in his mind, that he just meant, there were these positions and you took these positions and these acts, and you did these acts,

and then the result in the end would be, you win. And anybody who was trying to raise questions about that is just niggling and hassling, trying to keep the future from happening.

And yet, look at me, with all my ambiguity and my gift for nuance and my ability to see the other side of it -- I got wasted, at the crisis. Not that anybody survived it.

Q: What's the fundamental nature of that crisis ?

Oglesby: The crisis of leadership. It was a crisis of whether you were going to -- well, whether you were going to stay loyal to the truth, or give up on it, and go with the convenient. They were not always the same thing.

Q: The political truth ?

Oglesby: The political truth was that people needed to tolerate each other, and needed to adopt a stance of compromise and conciliation and reunification. But that ran in the face of what macho leaders saw as the right path for the movement. Self-educated and parochial people, in some cases mean-minded, who had no perspective, no world perspecctive, whether by learning or experience, who were simply dogmatic individuals, dogmatic personality types, who were in the movement in order to be drill sergeants, would have been just as happy being drill sergeants in the Right wing if their father had happened to be a Right wing bully instead of a Communist dock organizer bully. I mean, absolutism in the movement is such a question -- it's as if nobody gets anything done who is not an absolutist, at least for a moment at a particular time, on a particular subject, like

Mario Savio's famous speech, "There are times when you've got to throw your body into the machine and bring it to a halt. "

It's an amazing assertion of an individual's right to act on an individual's conscience. I think the society as a whole commends the ability to do that and cherishes it and values it highly and encourages it in people, in general. I think any society probably teaches people to have the courage of their convictions -- in general. They probably all do that. The Soviet Union probably teaches their kids to have the courage of their convictions.

But, come to being a dissenter -- hey! No! And all societies find a way to say it.

Yet you're called to dissent, to rebel, to open up new possibilities, to fight against the mugging in the street, but the mugging keeps going on.

And finally, what I want to say is, yes, I would give up politics gladly -- not that I haven't already, although I still think about it all the time, and everything that I write is on politics . Alas.

I can see saying, "I will give it all up, but first you've got to stop beating that guy up. When you stop beating that guy up, I badly want to go back to my normal life. But my normal life requires me to think of myself as a decent guy. If I can't think of myself as a decent guy, I can't function as a writer. No way to do that, that I know. "

I'd be glad to be cynical and current?. It's not that I'm more moral. I just don't know how to function as a writer unless I'm pretty clear with myself. So as long as the beating is going on in the street, I can't just get up and walk away, even if I don't

believe I can do anything about it. Which, you know, I guess I don't believe I can do anything about it, but I still can't get up and walk away from it, or pretend that it's not there, or pretend that I don't care.

All I can do is stand there in the street making speeches to people, saying, "Why don't you stop ? Why don't you see reason ?"

Q: That's why things were .....

Oglesby: To be able to keep going even when you don't know what you're doing, and never losee sight of the fact that you don't really know what you're doing, even when everybody else is yammering that they know exactly what they're doing,and trying to tell you that you're the only dope in the room -- except none of them agree with each other.

Q: That's what it seems like is valuable about the New Left in some ways, is that sense of , "All right, we don't know, and we're going to go ahead and try anyhow and we're going to experiment in the process. We're going to try and figure out as we go. " I guess, looking at it from this point, I'm struck with , I put myself in the position of trying to think about, what do we say about that experiment ?

Oglesby: I don't know. I'm interested in what you'll say about it. All I can say about it, I think, for now, is that I don't see what else we could have done, except to shift the emphasis from end points, which is what the absolutistic mind craves -- I think Marx's mind is pretty absolutistic in certain passages in that respect. He craved an end point, which is the commencing of what he presumed to call history, sneering at the rest of us. To shift from the conception of

social action as aiming towards a particular set of ends, institutionalized, to a conception of it as being the maintenance of a process -- I think there was a real stroke of collective genius in that, and that that was the genius of the New Left, to me, that we were about processes, and I think there was a very well worked out understanding that one of the things that this meant was about Socialism. It was as though we were trying to say: we can no longer presume to answer in advance the question of whether Capitalism or Socialism is best, but we are strongly persuaded that the decision as to which is best ought to be made by the people as a whole, freely engaged and fully informed and not intimidated. And the corollary of that is, if the people lose control of the political process, of the economy, they lose control of the political economy, and elite groups assume command, then you're in trouble. Just practically speaking, you are in big trouble. Sooner or later the chickens are going to come home to roost. You'll have a depression or get into a war or some other disruptive effect will be profoundly felt.

The only solution to the challenges of future economic growth , development, or just survival -- the only thing that you're really going to say in advance is that if the decision is made by the people, it will probably be OK, and if it's not, it won't.

In any case, to introduce the moral dimension, it ought to be made by the people, since who's to tell anybody else where to hang his hat ? Who's big enough to presume to judge somebody else ? We're all equal in the sight of the Lord and we have an equal right to say what we think, and on the practical side of democracy, running a modern state is so hard that you can only dream of getting it done

if you manage to reach out to the best brains and and souls, no matter how low-born they might be, and that's democracy. Open it up to anybody -- people call it meritocracy in that respect, but it's the democratic idea, that you call people, like Jack Kennedy did, to come on in and help, make the government your own, be a part of the government.

Q: I read some place, part of the promise of the universities is thinking about that in a long term institutionalized way, that here, what you're doing -- at that one moment in history, universities are picking up people from the working class, people who never would have -- and saying, come here and you will have more power, you will have more say.

Oglesby: Like you and me, in some senses. I mean, both of us are first generation college. I mean, I've got like 50 cousins, and one of them saw the inside of a university . She was chasing her husband. She landed him. And she went right back home, didn't need any more school.

That's true, that the university, the whole idea of the humanities really encourages people to dream impossible dreams. I guess we commend it for that. Its power to give you a dream is a great power. The church hasn't been able to do it, for a lot of us.

Q: It attracts people on that basis, or it did, it seems to me. I don't know exactly what is operating today.

Oglesby: Today it seems different. The dynamic of student life.

Q: But the promise at that point really is a university in society, and that's what Kennedy was so perfect for...and FDR, it seems like.

Which is why, I mean, that's the one thing, it seems to me, the whole question of students, can students powering a movement pause for aminute, what does this mean ? Can students play an important role in revolution ? What is a student's role in social change ? What can a campus force do ? Do you have any thoughts on that?

Oglesby: My whole talk has been about that.

Q: But it was argued in '65 --

Oglesby: -- I said, these God damn cotton picking students are the dandiest thing that ever happened to this country since George Washington. Bright eyed and bushy tailed and raring to go. You didn't have to tell them that they were responsible. On the contrary, you had to get them to let up on their recriminations, their guilt. That was the bad part of it. I didn't like that. And I think maybe, the cultural angle-- I said, this is sort of Jewish, to see guilt as a major source of motivation, and to freely employ guilt. "You have so much to eat, your brother in Ethiopia has nothing, how can you just sit there ?"

Gee, God, Ma !

I didn't like that part of it. I'm too much of a fundamentalist to give guilt a big place. Guilt should be for the enemy, but brothers and sisters I think should rejoice in their power to move and act. That's the best thing, to feel alive together. That's unbeatable.

Q: Do you think you'll feel that again ?

Oglesby: No. No. No, I hope not. At least not until I've had enough chance to think this one through and say something about it.

Oh well, I could go for another big -- well, several big gulps of experience. But not in that mode. I don't know what. But not that.

I'd like to fight my way free of these things, but it doesn't seem to be happening.

QL Well, it's a basic intellectual dilemma, that one faces, that has been around for a long time.

Oglesby: Yes, but what I need (laughter, crosstalk)..... I'd be very happy writing a novel.

[END OF INTERVIEW]